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THE NEW YORKER

June 21 & 28, 1999

1. Being a Spokane Indian, I only pick up Indian hitchhikers. I learned this particular ceremony from my fathe

2. Lee Strasberg, a founder of the Group Theatre and the great teacher of the American Method, famously advi

3. The autumn I was seventeen Richard Nixon made a visit to our town, at the western edge of Cape Cod, and

4. Josef Kavalier's determination to storm the exclusive Hofzinser Club of Prague took full form over breakfast

5. My father is gone. I am slouched in a cast-aluminum chair across from two men, one the manager of the hote

6. He sits on the mattress, the fat spread of his ass popping my fitted sheets from their corners. His clothes are st

7. Jim and Uncle Al did not set out on their journey until after supper, when the heat of the day had broken at l

8. Allen Fein is on his way to Port Authority when he stubs his toe and scuffs his shoe—puts a nick in a five-hu

9. Skulls make better pillows than you think. Dr. Peter Luce (the famous sexologist) rests his cheek on the varn

0. Down the long concourse they came unsteadily, Enid favoring her damaged hip, Alfred paddling at the air wit

1. You couldn't tell anymore that they had separate desks. For fifteen years, Roselva and Helen had worked tog

2. on a raft in water. Floating. Every day when she comes home from school, she puts on her bikini

3. ppy East Coast resort island in the middle of summer, we just flew in for the wedding of my i

4. with a certificate in commerce and the equivalent, in those days, of ten dollars to my name

5. man, I didn't seek out the pleasure of women. At least not like my comrades in arms, wh

6. treamers, by the bathhouse entrance. Tuna on shish kebab and pineapple slices i

7. l Emily. She caught her breath. Everything was striking her in the solar ple

8. letter of 23 Feb., which accompanied the I CAN SPEAK!™ you returned, m

9. -haired, pale-faced, slender idealist, tells itself with a grim brevity, in keepi

0. t as a asset like that would you. But it's the arm. You want to see it? You

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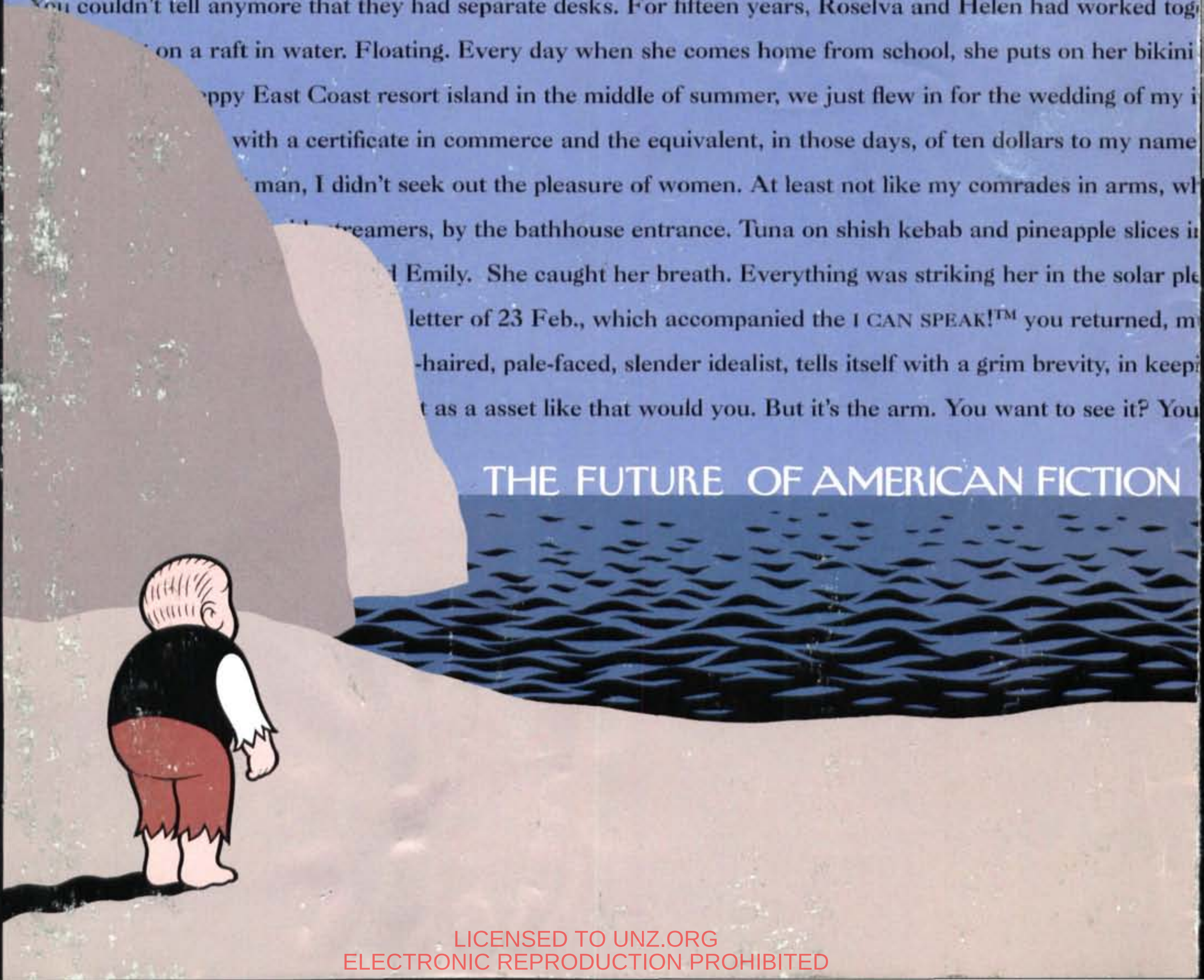

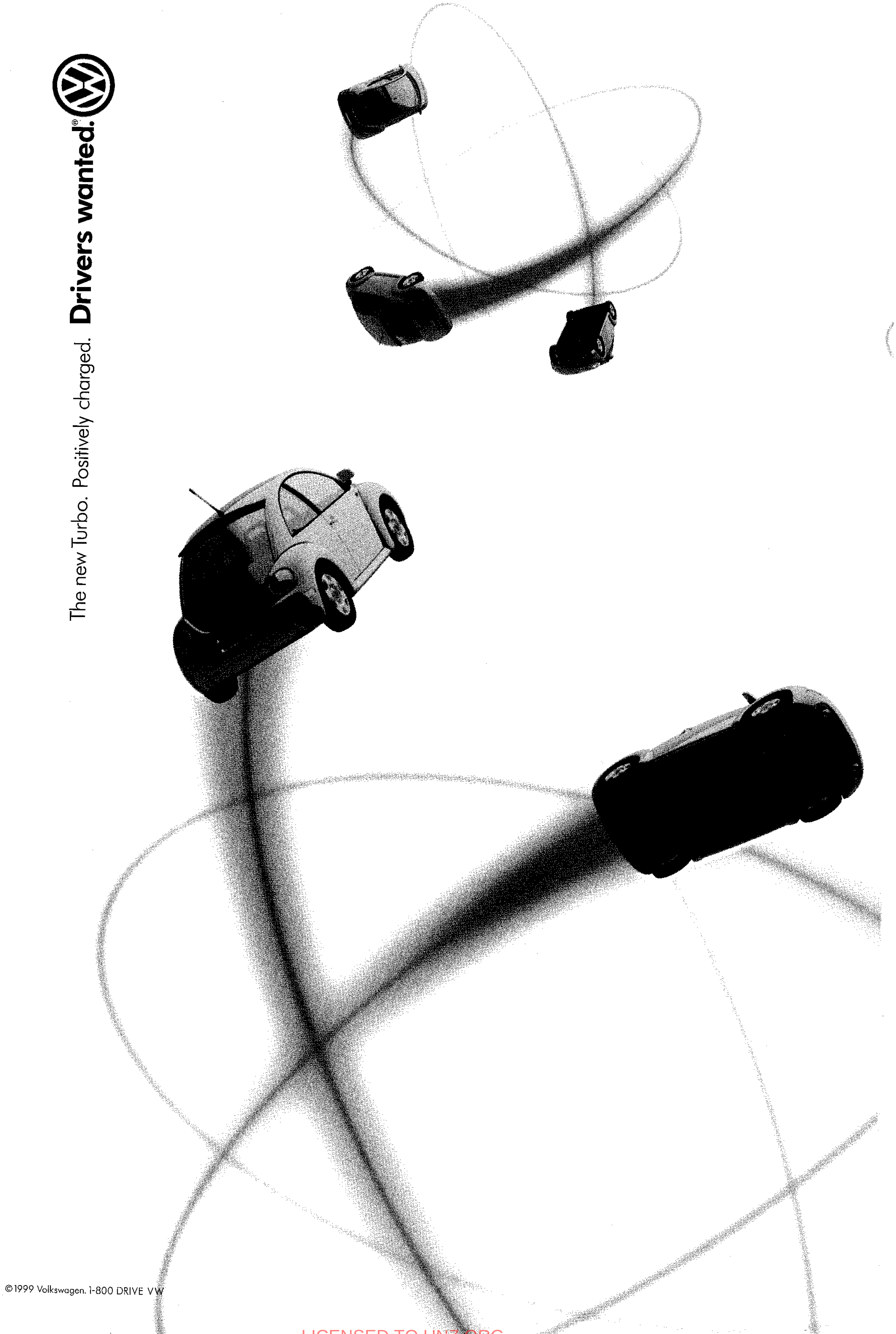
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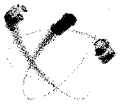

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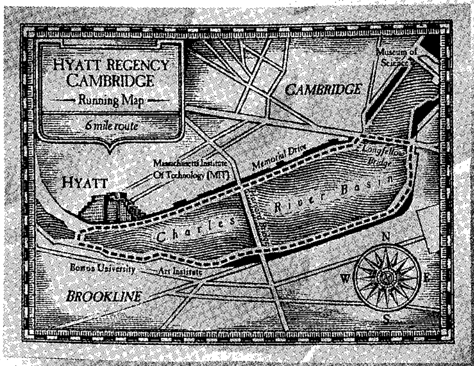
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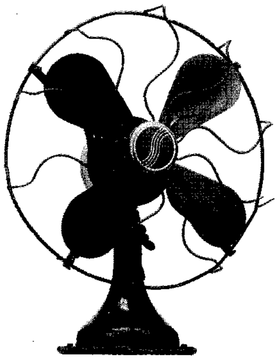

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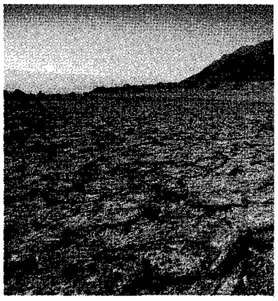

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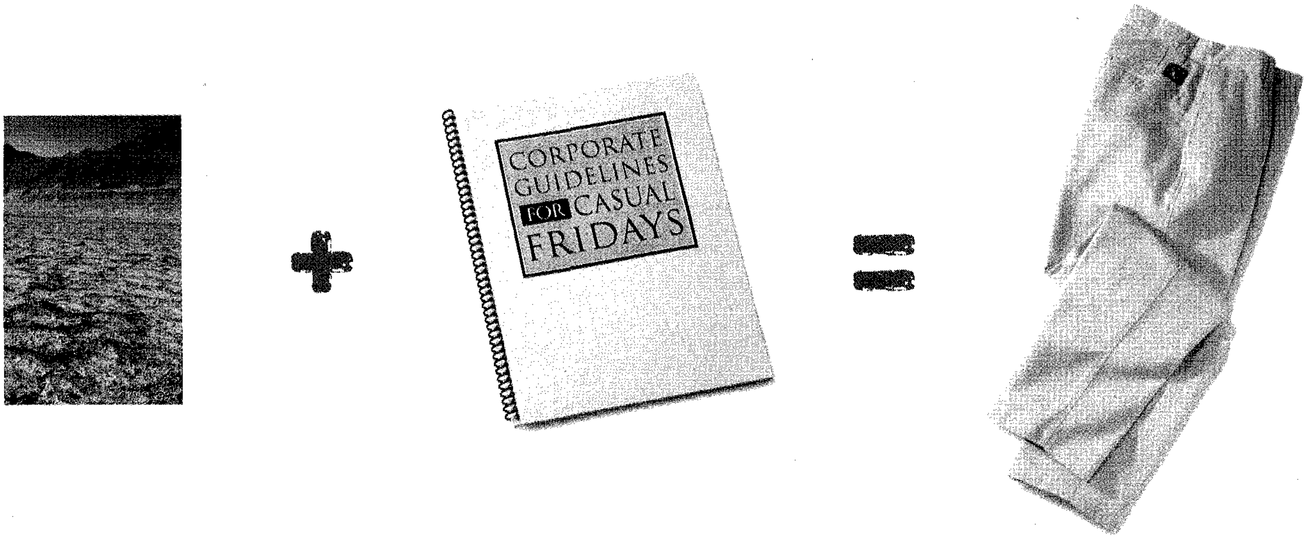

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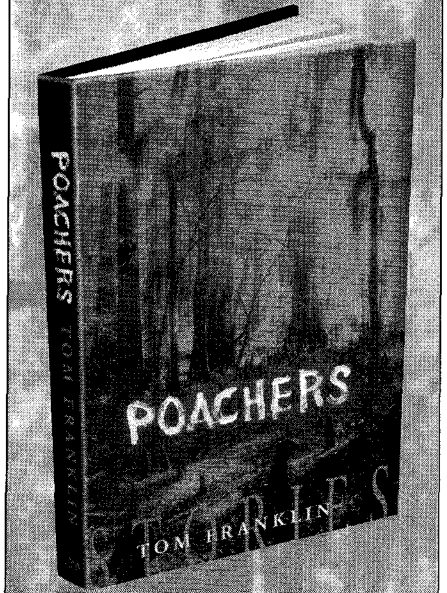

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THE FUTURE OF AMERICAN FICTION

JUNE 21 & 28, 1999

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COVER *20 Writers for the 21st Century, by Chip Kidd and Chris Ware*

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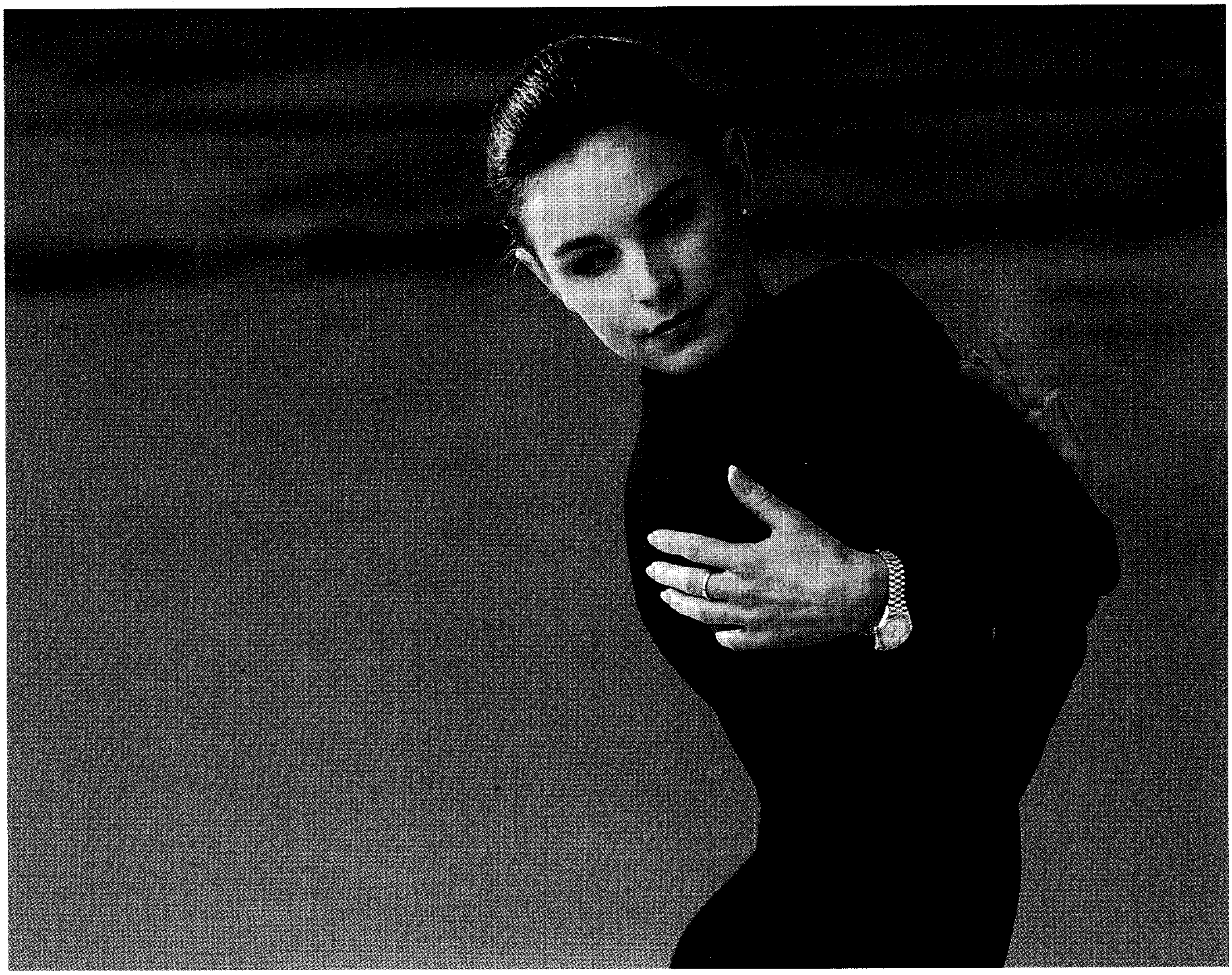

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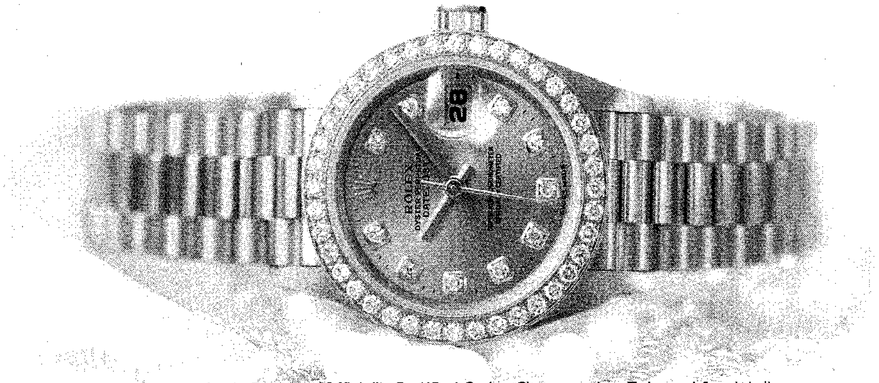

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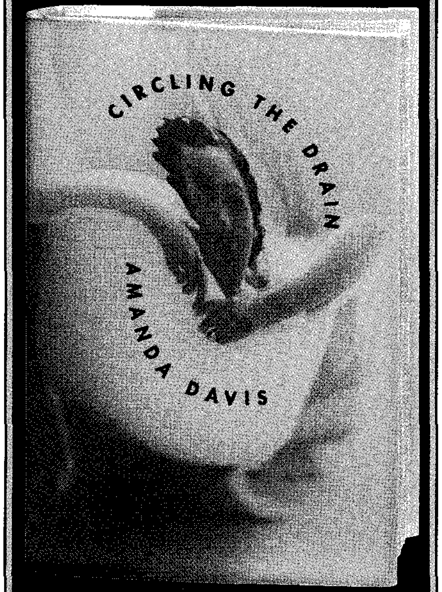

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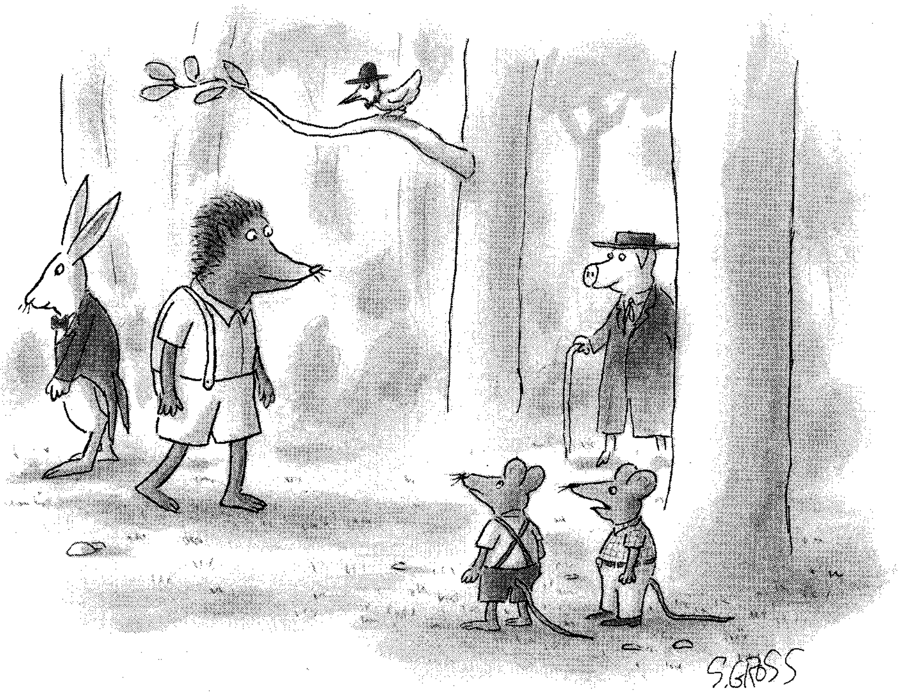

"That's Stanley. Stanley once saw Beatrix Potter naked."

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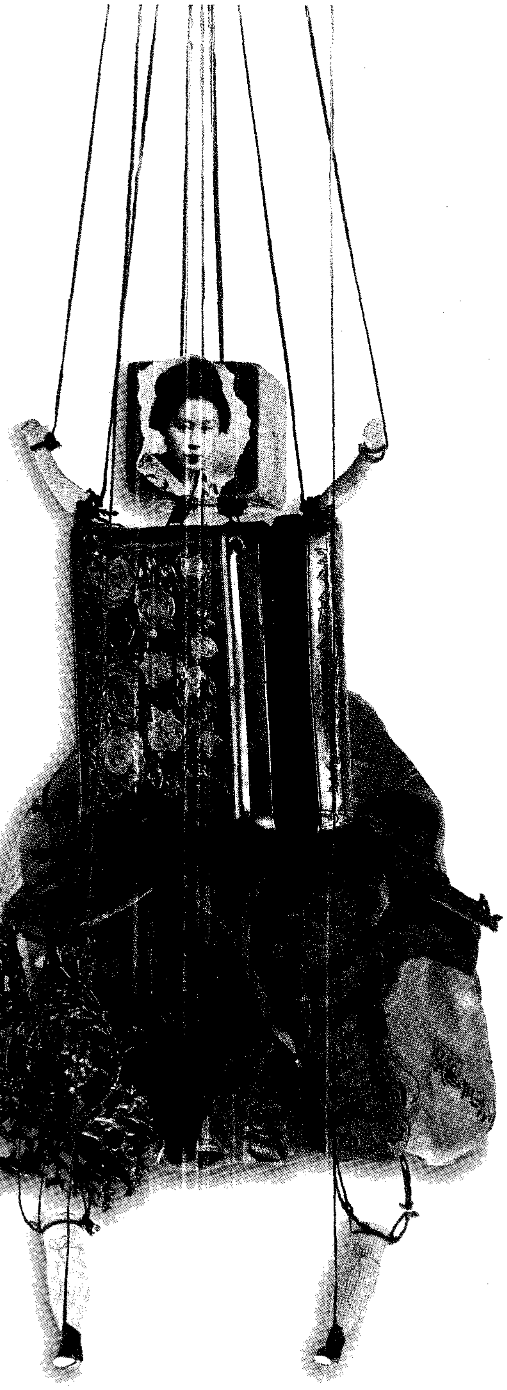
KOHINA TURNED OUT TO BE AN EVEN MORE CELEBRATED GEISHA THAN I WAS IN MY PRIME, but I don't think she ever recognized her own beauty. She never understood why men treated her the way they did. I remember when she was an apprentice, there was a certain actor—let's call him Mr. Ikeda—who used to come to the Gion district all the time. He was quite popular among the geisha because he was rarely moody, but he never once asked for me—until, that is, I took on Kohina as my younger sister and began to train her. I could tell from the start that Kohina found him enchanting: she'd seen all his films, and she was in awe, really. Yet somehow it never occurred to her he might feel attracted to her too.

Then one evening as we arrived at the Mitsuyo Teahouse, the mistress took us aside to say that Mr. Ikeda had been sitting alone a half-hour in the little room overlooking the moss garden, turning down all her offers of company, just waiting for us and no one else. We slid the door open a crack to peek in, and there he sat, drawing lines in the beaded moisture on an unopened bottle of Absolut Vodka. Beside it on the table stood two untouched glasses. "Only two glasses," I said to Kohina. "He's waiting for you, not both of us."

She was wearing a cinnamon-colored kimono with a design of autumn grasses, and she looked magnificent, but I could see she had no confidence in herself. I'm not sure what she would have done if I hadn't stepped aside and slid the door open so she had no choice but to go in. She gave me such a look! Nervous and excited all at once. The flush in her skin reminded me how she'd appeared that afternoon when she'd stepped from the bath into the chilly air, still steaming.



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CHRIS WARE (Cover; spot drawings throughout) is the creator of "The ACME Novelty Library" comic-book series. His comic strip "Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth" will be published as a book next year. ♦

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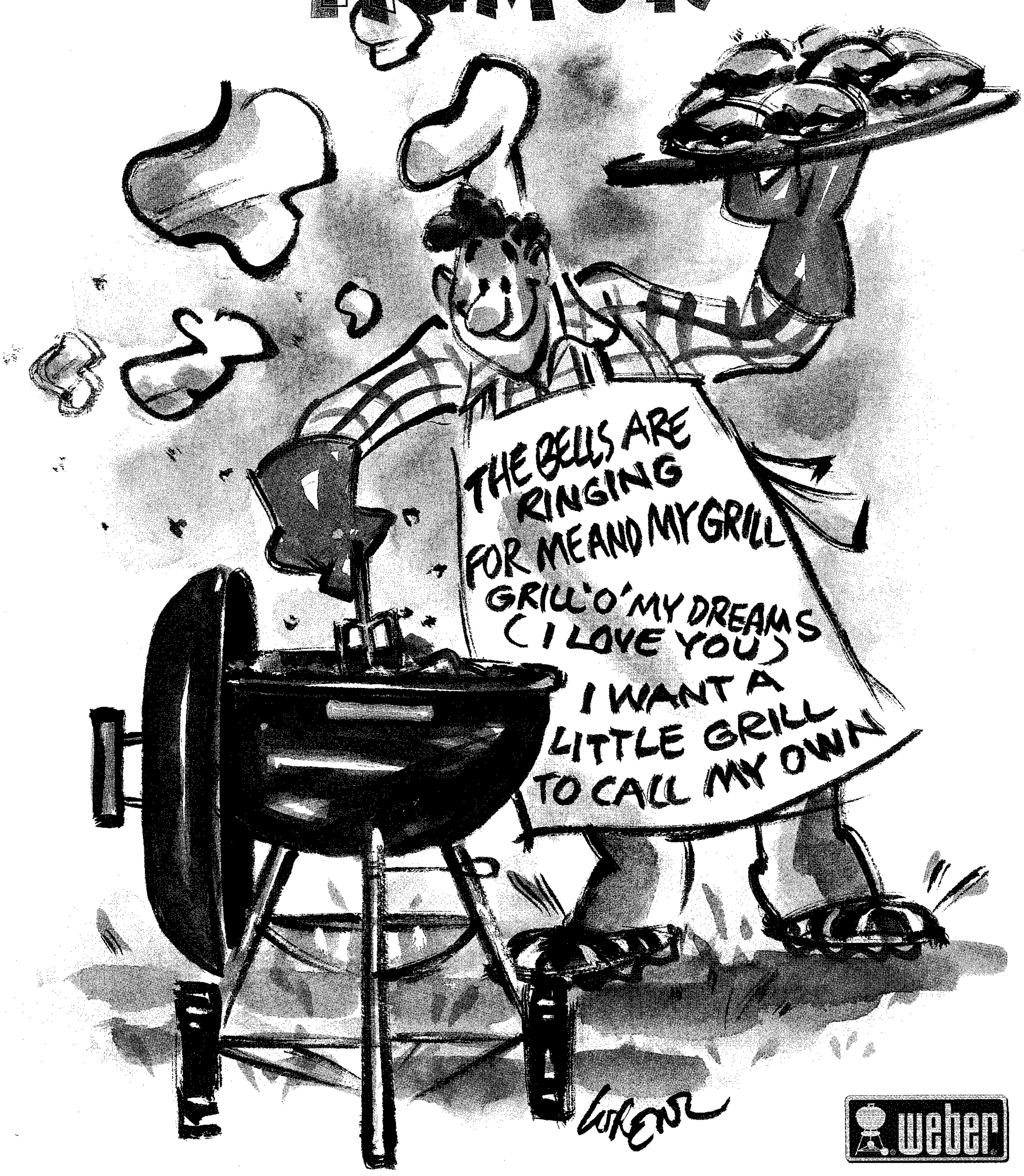
THE BELLS ARE RINGING FOR ME AND MY GRILL
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I WANT A LITTLE GRILL TO CALL MY OWN
LORENZ

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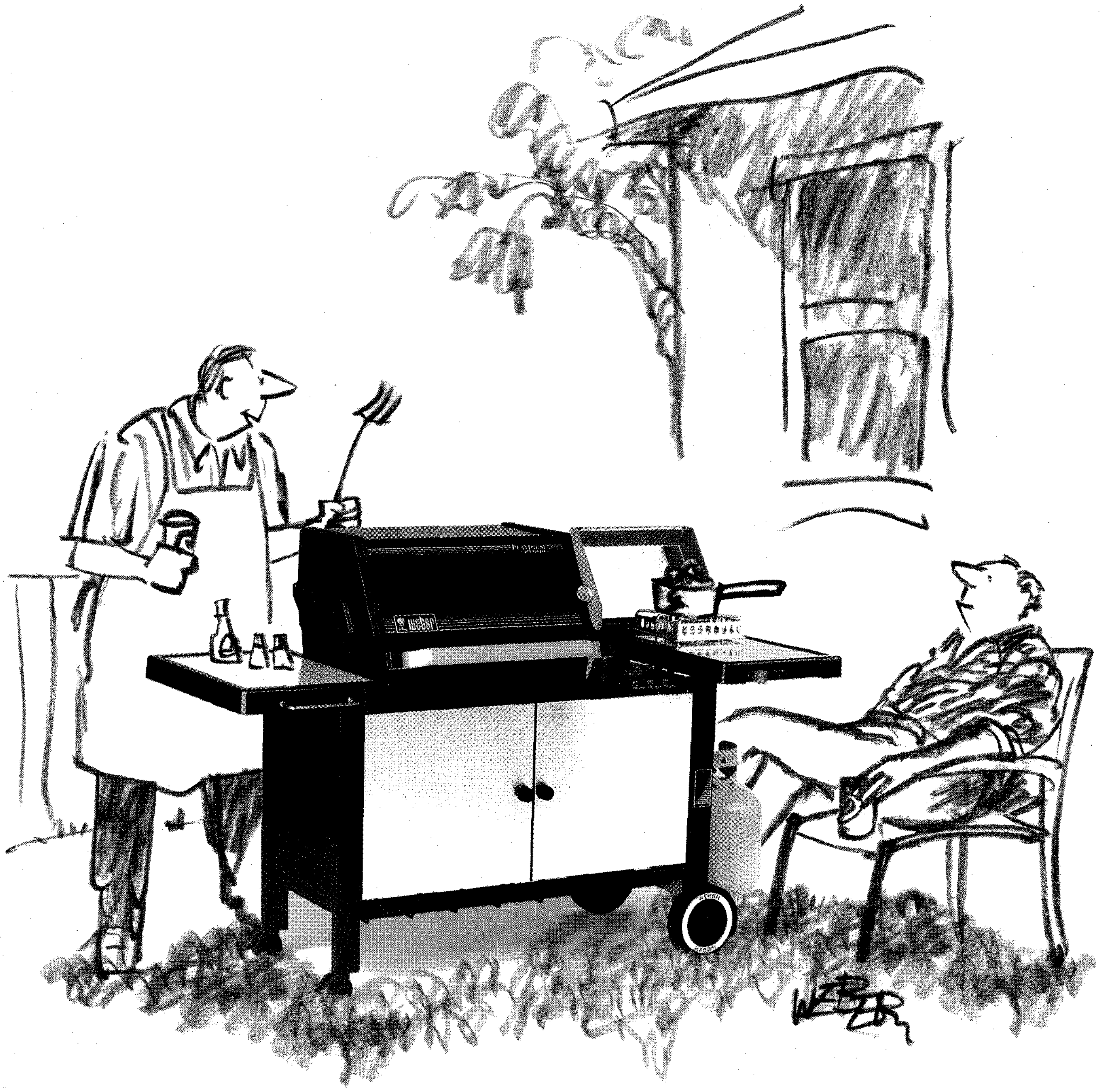

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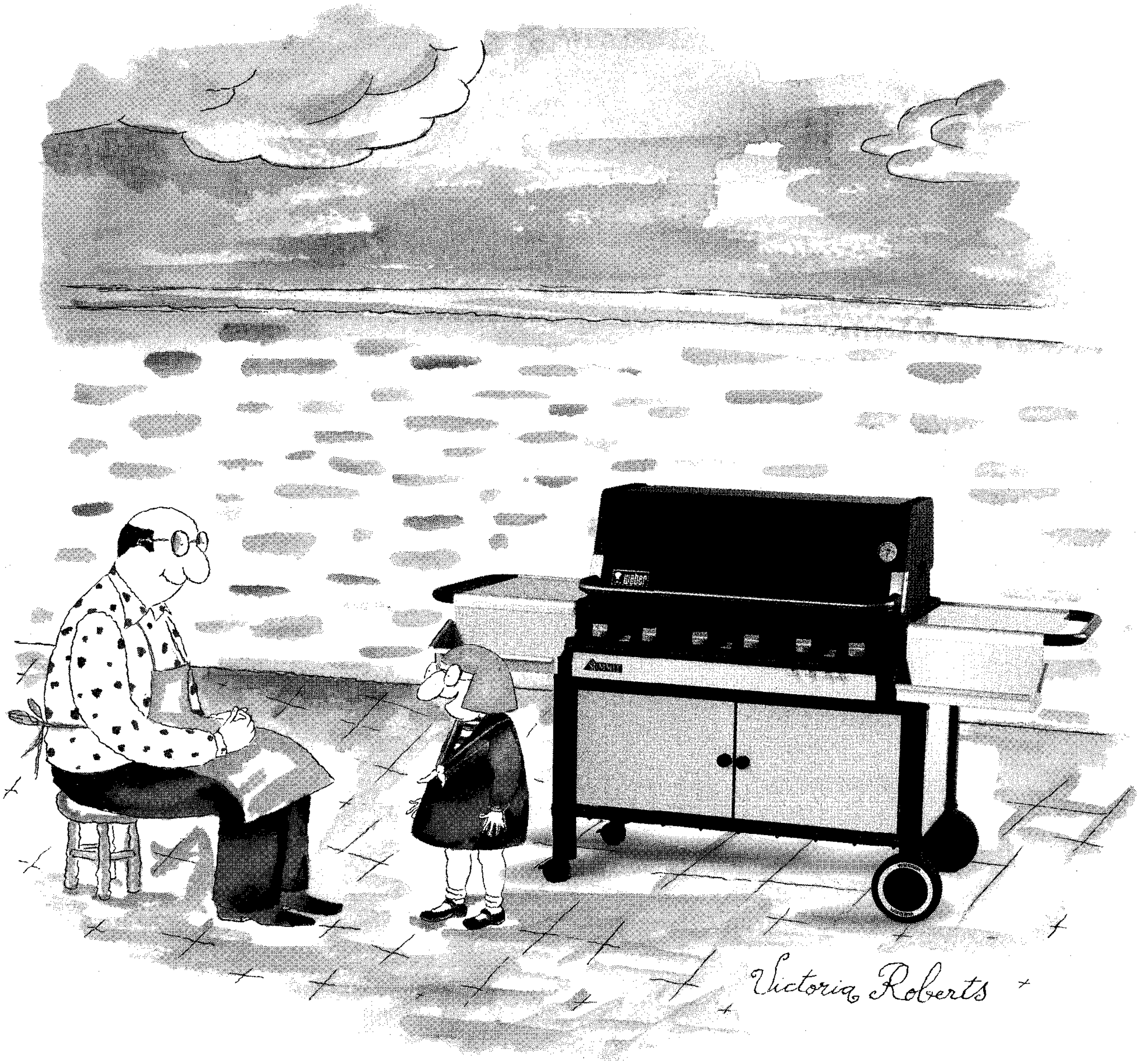
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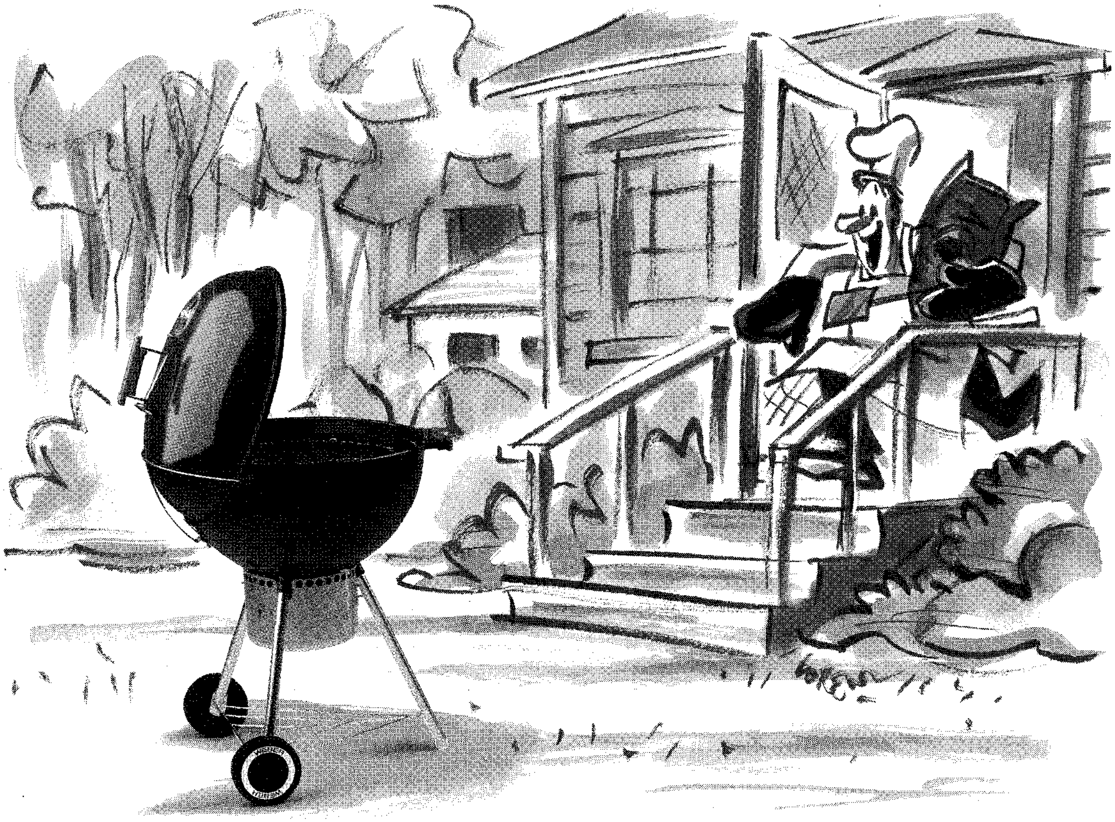

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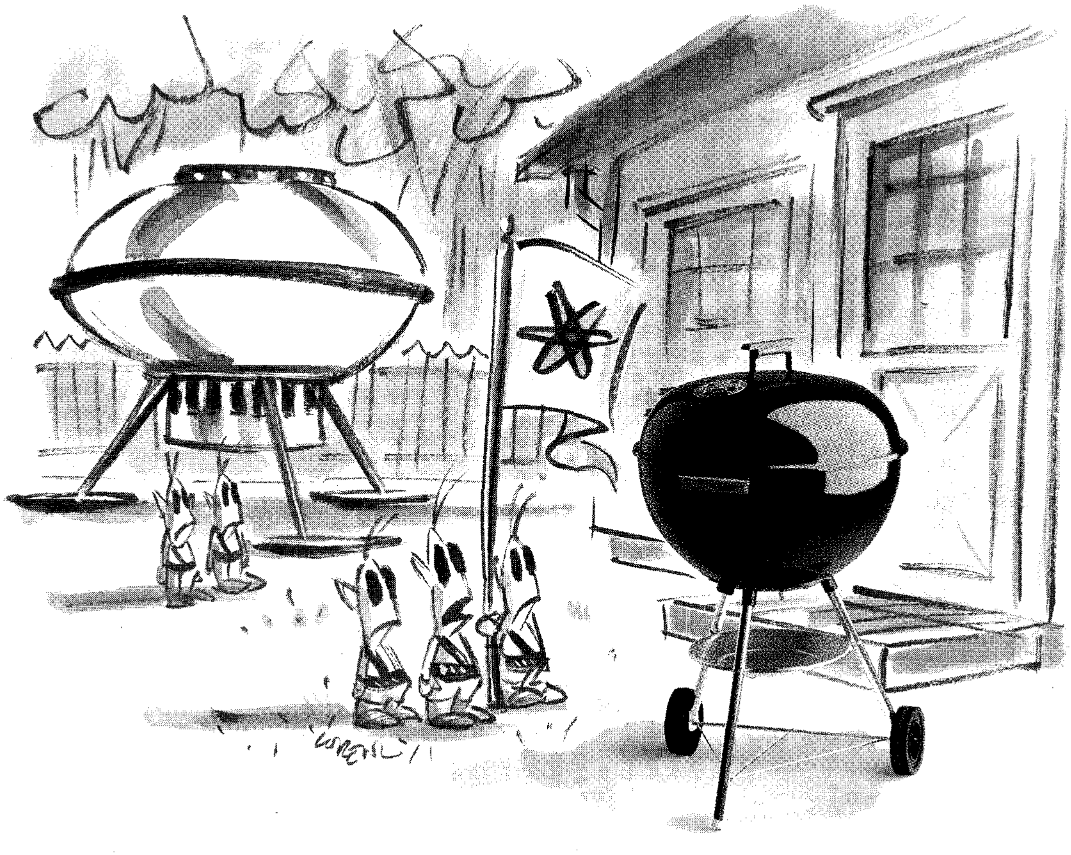

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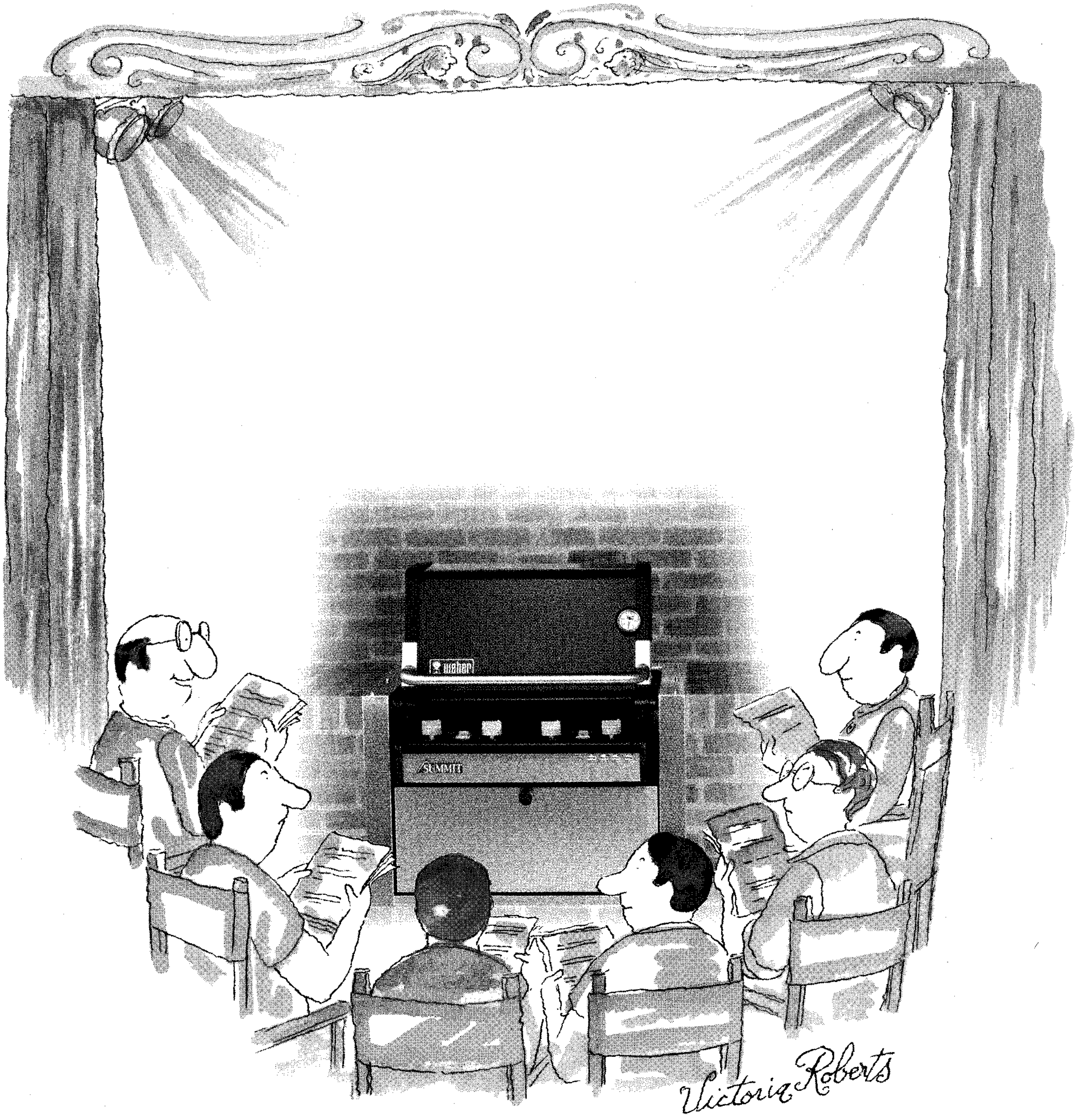
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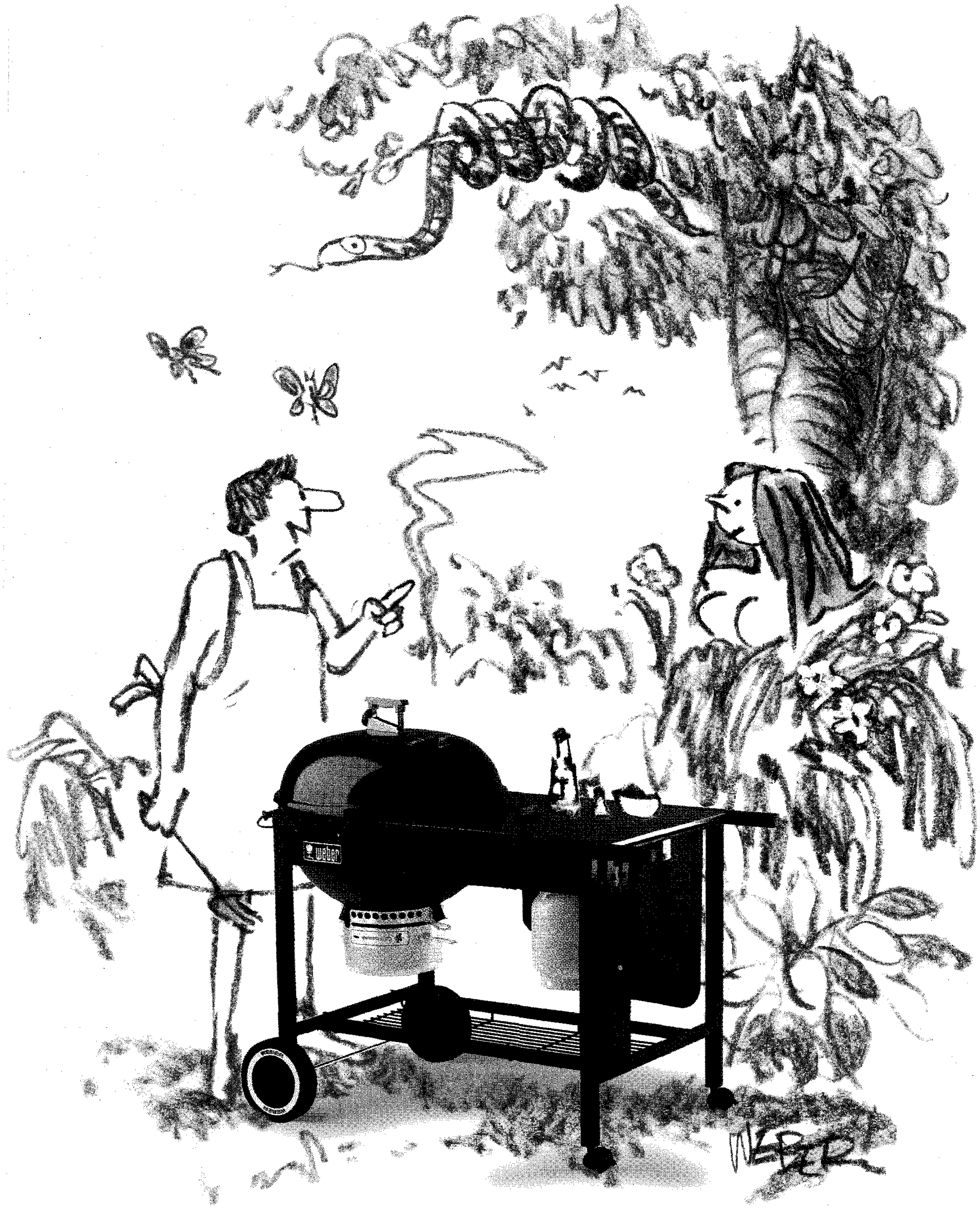

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THE MAIL

CICERO, ESQ.

Alexander Stille's tale of the prosecution of classical art looters in Sicily (A Reporter at Large, "Head Found on Fifth Avenue," May 24th) recalls one of the first recorded events of this kind: the trial of Gaius Verres, the notoriously corrupt Roman proconsul of Sicily from 73 to 71 B.C. In 70, Verres was brought before a Roman court and tried by the orator Marcus Tullius Cicero, in his only case as a prosecutor. The Second Verrines orations record Cicero's thundering rebuke "You scoundrel, what is the meaning of this monstrous effrontery and mindless folly?" Verres, unusually for a person of his rank, was found guilty, but he was fined only a small fraction of the worth of his loot. He fled with most of it to Massilia, the modern Marseilles, where he remained, under an edict of banishment from Italy issued by Marc Antony, for refusing to turn over the rest of his spoils, until he died, reportedly by an assassin's hand, in 43 B.C.

ED KROWITZ
Alexandria, Va.

CURATING AMERICA

It doesn't seem to have crossed Peter Schjeldahl's mind that the Whitney's injunction to "Make Some Sense of America" (The Art World, May 17th, on the Whitney Museum's "The American Century: Art and Culture, Part I, 1900-1950") was meant ironically, given the show's bombastic size and its assertion that culture in general—and American culture specifically—is obfuscatingly multilayered and hopelessly fragmented. The crucial elements of the show are precisely its unwieldy size and its manner of presentation. Schjeldahl grumbles that the art works in the show are contextualized in a way that diminishes their individual greatness, but when so-called great works are placed alongside works of similar stature they often undergo unexpected status adjustments. I appreciated the enormous scope of "The American Century" for this one reason: whether intentionally or not, the show allows the viewer to see works of art in a setting in which they can be appreciated not for their singularity or their monumental cultural distance from the average viewer, but for their relative proximity. One has the opportunity to experience Man Ray, for example, not as the Parisian giant but as the American worker-photographer. Schjeldahl found his work here "shrunken and stale," but to me it was refreshingly vital and near.

DONALD MENGAY
Brooklyn, N.Y.

THE NEW CURIOSITY SHOP

It's one thing to view the gay men in Alan Hollinghurst's book "The Spell" as the Other, as John Updike does in "A Same-Sex Idyll" (Books, May 31st), another to measure those characters' behavior against an implied heterosexual norm. Updike's lofty, curiosity-shop approach to gayness (especially as depicted in a work of fiction) and his description of the book's fundamentally benign world as "a Genet prison without guards" reveals a reviewer out of his depth.

ARTHUR BOEHM
New York City

THE HEMINGWAY RULES

For nearly thirty years I've played in a Friday-night poker game, small stakes, and I've been a consistent loser. After reading Lillian Ross's "Hemingway Told Me Things" (Dept. of Amplification, May 24th), I adopted one of Hemingway's poker rules: "Never call; either raise or throw down." And I won. "What made you so aggressive?" someone asked. I just smiled sweetly. Let's see if Hemingway's advice holds up for two weeks in a row.

ANITA HOWARD
Austin, Tex.

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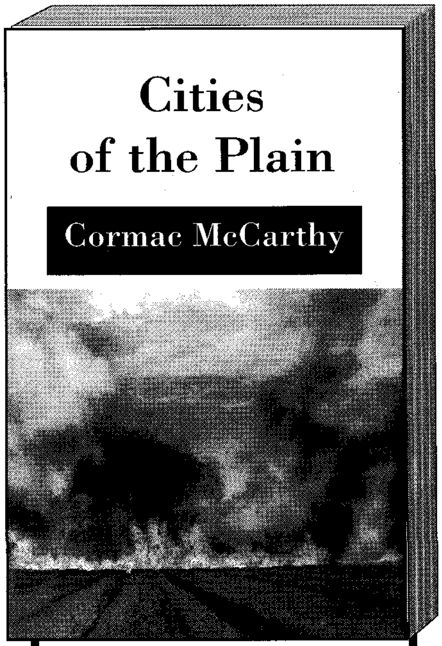
Letters should be sent with the writer's name, address, and daytime phone number to "The Mail," The New Yorker, 20 West 43rd Street, New York, N.Y. 10036. They can also be faxed to 212-840-8489 or sent via E-mail to themail@newyorker.com. Letters may be edited for length and clarity, and may be published in any medium; we regret that owing to the volume of correspondence we cannot reply to every letter.



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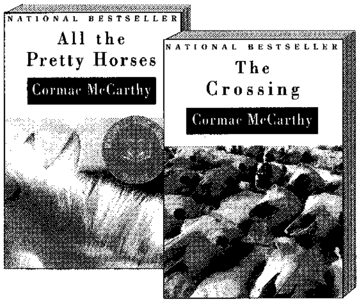

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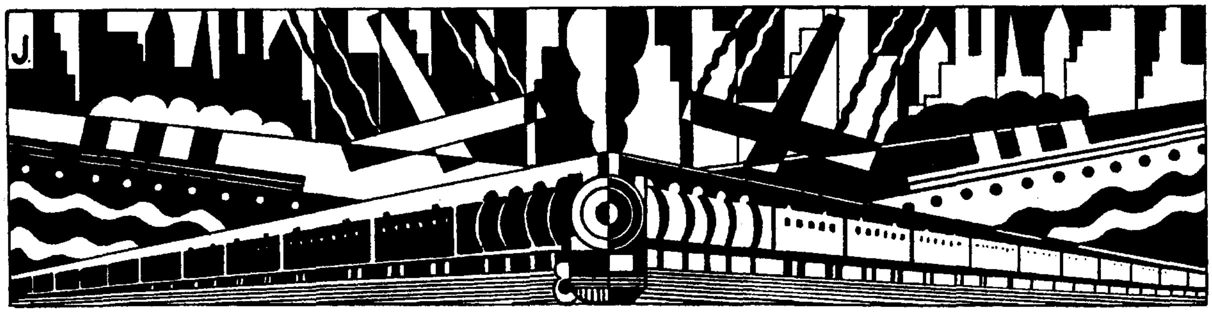
GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN



THE THEATRE

OPENINGS AND PREVIEWS

(Please call the phone number listed with the theatre for timetables and ticket information.)

Angelique—Lisa Gay Hamilton leads the cast in a drama by Lorena Gale, about an African slave in Montreal in the seventeen-thirties. Preview on June 16. Opens June 17 at 8. (MCC, 120 W. 28th St. 727-7765.)

Bash—Calista Flockhart stars in a trio of one-acts by Neil LaBute examining the nature of evil. In previews through June 23. Opens June 24 at 7. (Douglas Fairbanks, 432 W. 42nd St. 239-6200.)

Brave Smiles: Another Lesbian Tragedy—From the Five Lesbian Brothers, a comic exploration of homophobia in literature, theatre, and film. June 18-27 at 7:30 and June 19, 25, and 26 at 7:30 and 10:30. (P.S. 122, 150 First Ave., at 9th St. 477-5288.)

Gemini—Albert Innaurato's 1976 comedy. Opens June 16 at 7. (Second Stage, 307 W. 43rd St. 246-4422.)

I'm the One That I Want—The comedian Margaret Cho tells the story of her disastrous descent into Hollywood. Previews begin June 22. (Westbeth Theatre Center, 151 Bank St. 307-4100.)

S	M	T	W	T	F	S
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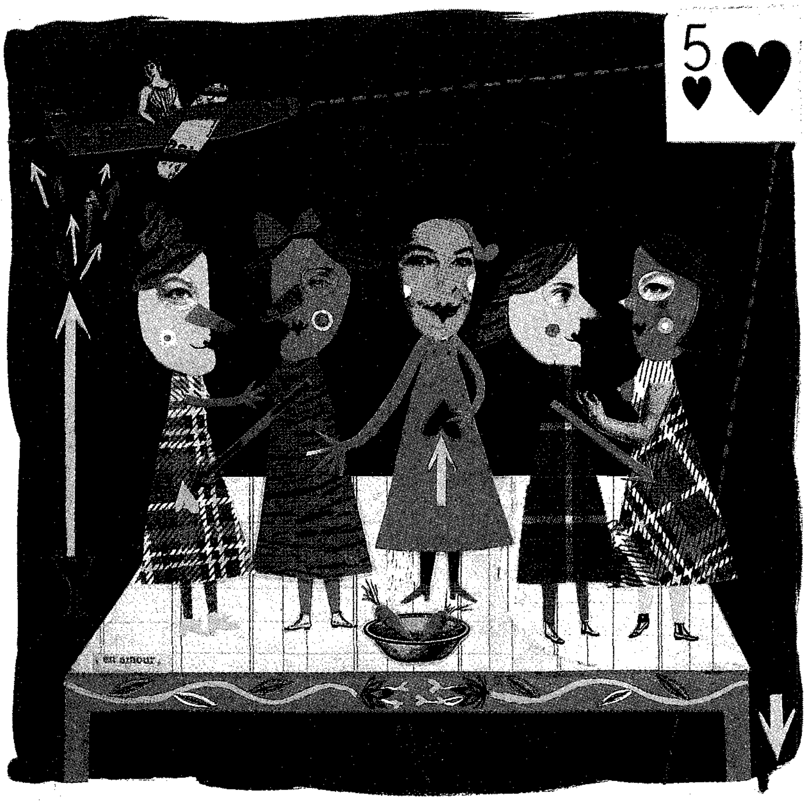
27	28	29				

Small Craft Warning—David Greenspan leads the cast of the Worth Street Theatre's production of Tennessee Williams's 1972 drama. Previews June 24-27. Opens June 28 at 8. (Tribeca Playhouse, 111 Reade St., at West Broadway. 604-4195.)

The Taming of the Shrew—Allison Janney has the lead in Shakespeare's comedy, the New York Shakespeare Festival's first outdoor production of the season. In previews through June 26. Opens June 27 at 8 and runs through July 11. (Delacorte Theatre, Central Park near W. 81st St. For information about free tickets, which are required, call 539-8750.)

The Trestle at Pope Lick Creek—Two teens living in a country town during the Depression are at the center of this drama by Naomi Wallace. In previews. (New York Theatre Workshop, 79 E. 4th St. 460-5475.)



The Five Lesbian Brothers, in "Brave Smiles: Another Lesbian Tragedy."

OPENED RECENTLY

Amy's View—Dame Judi Dench is an amazing actress, but can she keep you in your seat for the duration of another one of David Hare's pompous plays? (Just barely.) This one claims to be about the tangled relationship between an actress from theatre's golden age and her modern daughter, who marries an arbiter of pop culture, but it's really about Hare's out-of-touch ideas regarding how today's audiences view theatre—meaning him. Directed by Richard Eyre. (Ethel Barrymore, 243 W. 47th St. 239-6200.)

Annie Get Your Gun—A terrific revival of Irving Berlin's solid-gold score. It's played for romance and sass, which the vulnerable and charming Bernadette Peters and the hunky, easygoing Tom Wopat deliver in spades. (Marquis, Broadway at 45th St. 307-4100.)

Beautiful Thing—Jonathan Harvey's 1993 drama, set in London, about two working-class boys who fall in love. (Cherry Lane, 38 Commerce St. 239-6200. Closes June 27.)

Closer—Patrick Marber's slick dissection of the anatomy of desire follows four characters as they meet, mate, and move on in a kind of algebra of solitude. Marber can be very funny, and his writing is tight, but his staging is not. (Reviewed in our issue of 4/5/99.) (Music Box, 239 W. 45th St. 239-6200.)

Death of a Salesman—The casting of this production of Arthur Miller's masterpiece is generally uneven, but the show still packs a wallop. (3/8/99) (Eugene O'Neill, 230 W. 49th St. 239-6200.)

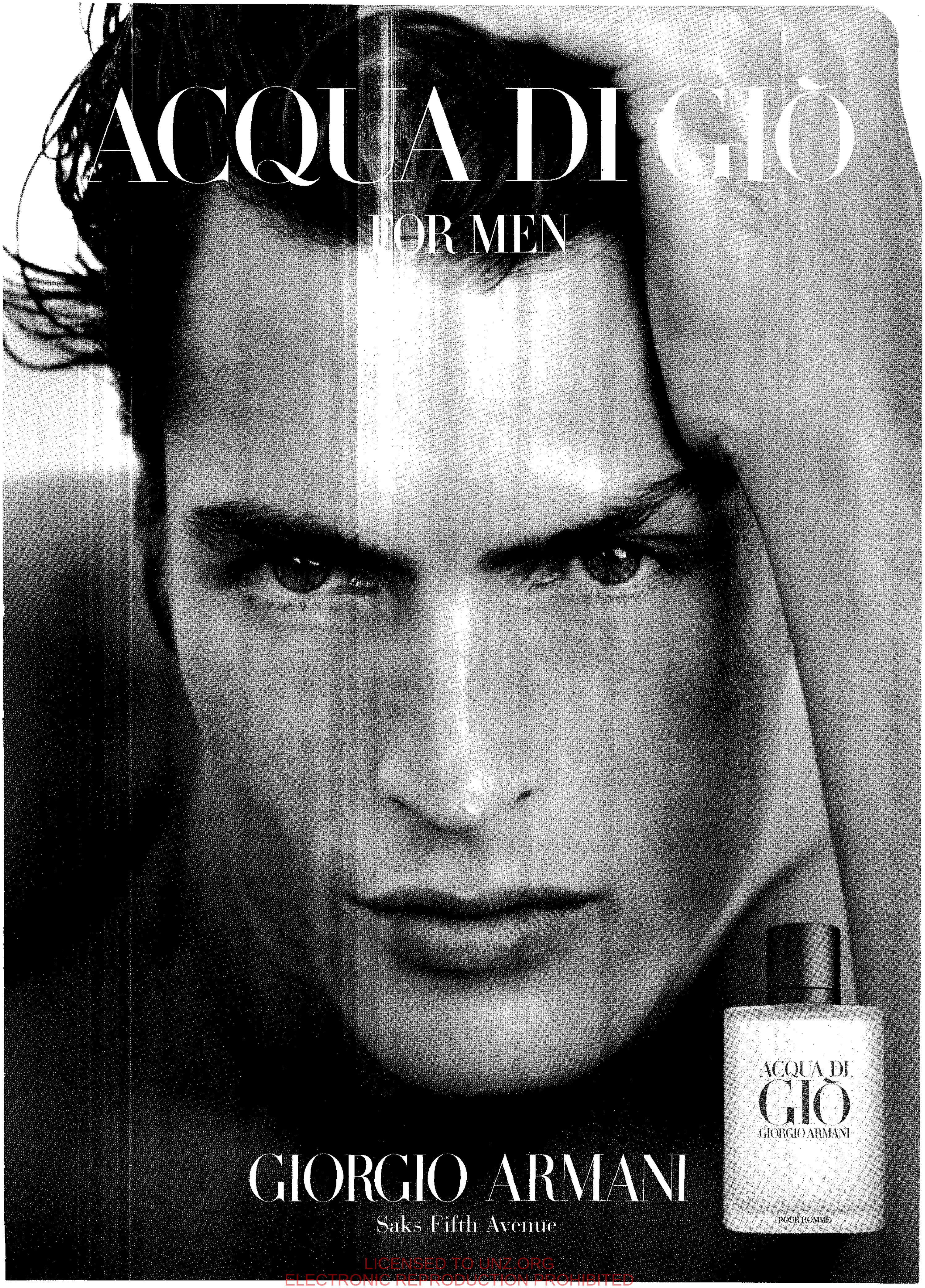
East Is East—This autobiographical first play by Ayub Khan-Din is set in a working-class English town in the seventies, in a family headed by a bullheaded Pakistani father (Edward A. Hajj) and a more yielding English mother (Jenny Sterlin, in a vivid, vinegary performance). It is a lively and talky evening—there are six mostly grown, opinionated children in the family—and slightly too long. What is most memorable is Derek McLane's set, which features a chip shop so authentic you can smell food cooking, and a living room with the kind of shabby-perky décor which has become a signature of New Group productions. Directed by Scott Elliott. (Manhattan Theatre Club, at City Center, 131 W. 55th St. 581-1212. Closes July 11.)

Fosse—This steamy revue of works by the choreographer Bob Fosse doesn't reveal anything new about the man behind the dances, but it does remind us why we won't be forgetting him anytime soon. (Broadhurst, 235 W. 44th St. 239-6200.)

The Gathering—Theodore Bikel stars in a new play by Arje Shaw, about three generations of a family living in New York during the Reagan years. (Playhouse 91, at 316 E. 91st St. 831-2000.)

Gertrude & Alice: A Likeness to Loving—Lola Pashalinski and Linda Chapman portray Stein and Toklas, in a play they co-wrote. (Signature Theatre, 555 W. 42nd St. 244-7529. Closes June 27.)

SARA FANELLI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New York City

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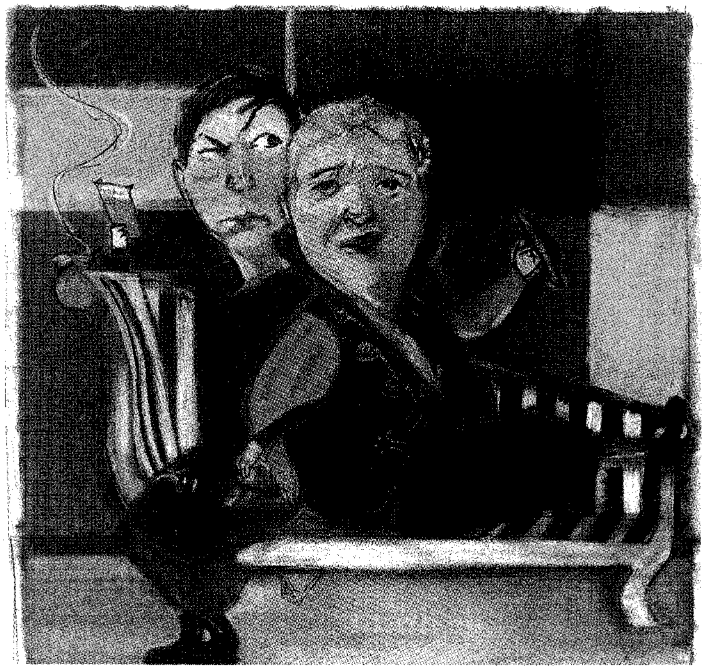
Goodnight Children Everywhere—Richard Nelson's drama is set in London and concerns the reunion of four siblings separated during the Second World War. (Playwrights Horizons, 416 W. 42nd St. 279-4200. Closes July 11.)

Hamlet—East Coast Artists' version of Shakespeare's play, directed by Richard Schechner. (Performing Garage, 33 Wooster St. 966-3651. Closes June 20.)

Hurrah at Last—In Richard Greenberg's most recent play, a writer (Peter Frechette) is tortured by his family and his finances. A Roundabout staging. (5/14/99) (Gramercy Theatre, 127 E. 23rd St. 719-1300.)

The Iceman Cometh—Eugene O'Neill's despairing drama about a barroom full of losers. This beautiful production is a rare opportunity to see a fully realized staging of a masterpiece by America's first great playwright. It has countless rewards, not the least of which is an outstanding ensemble cast that Kevin Spacey, in a brilliant turn as the crazily optimistic salesman Hickey, leads in a way that lights up all the other performances rather than overshadowing them. Howard Davies is the director. (Brooks Atkinson, 256 W. 47th St. 307-4100.)



Linda Chapman and Lola Pashalinski, in the Foundry Theatre's "Gertrude & Alice: A Likeness to Loving."

RON LEACH

If Love Were All—Twiggy and Harry Groener star as Gertrude Lawrence and Noël Coward, in this appealing revue-cum-reminiscence by Sheridan Morley; the pair sing some twenty Coward songs and portray, with sweetness and without sentimentality, the remarkable, lifelong friendship between the two, who met when Noël was twelve and Gertie fourteen. (Lucille Lortel, 121 Christopher St. 239-6200.)

It Ain't Nothin' But the Blues—A marvellous collection of songs performed by a dynamic cast. The music alone could have showcased the influence of the blues, but instead the audience is subjected to explanatory notes and bad-talk-show banter. Fortunately, the blues triumphantly survives even this. (Vivian Beaumont, Lincoln Center. 239-6200.)

The Job—A dark comedy written and directed by Shem Bitterman. (WPA Theatre, 519 W. 23rd St. 206-0523. Closes June 20.)

Jodie's Body—In Aviva Jane Carlin's one-woman play (which she wrote and performs) about an artist's model living in London, the initial sight of a large naked woman posing with one arm behind her head and one leg extended straight out, toes up, is distracting only for the first few minutes. After that, Carlin affectingly moves from fat-girl humor (stupendous thighs, dimply bums) to more abstract ideas related to the flesh (racism, beauty) without allowing her seriousness to jolt or become overbearing. (ArcLight, 152 W. 71st St. 307-4100. Closes June 27.)

Night Must Fall—The main problem with this National Actors Theatre production of Emlyn Williams's 1935 thriller is that the play was probably never that thrilling to begin with, and it certainly isn't thrilling in 1999. Big house, rich old lady in a wheelchair, charming stranger? *Please.* (Helen Hayes, 240 W. 44th St. 239-6200. Closes June 27.)

Peter Pan—The former Olympic gymnast Cathy Rigby is back in town to star in a limited engagement of the 1954 musical. (Gershwin, 51st St. west of Broadway. 307-4100.)

Ring Round the Moon—Christopher Fry's 1950 adaptation of Anouilh's comedy "L'Invitation au Château." Gerald Gutierrez is the director. (Belasco, 111 W. 44th St. 239-6200. Closes June 27.)

Snakebit—Two guys, a gal, and an AIDS test. With all the one-liners and dialogue cued by contemporary culture, this comedy-drama by the actor and first-time playwright David Marshall Grant, like a lot of new plays, seems like a sitcom rewritten for the stage (fewer jokes, more "issues"). The cast, though, is topnotch. (Century Theatre, 111 E. 15th St. 239-6200.)

La Terrasse—An agonizingly airless comedy by Jean-Claude Carrière (the translation is by Mark O'Donnell). A couple is splitting up in their Paris apartment; before they depart, a real-estate agent shows the place to several prospective tenants, and, oh, what noncomedic high jinks ensue! Mike Ockrent's direction is like *mélasse en Janvier.* (Manhattan Theatre Club, at City Center, 131 W. 55th St. 581-1212.)

Things You Shouldn't Say Past Midnight—Peter Ackerman's screwball bedroom comedy consists mainly of a sublimely ridiculous conference call involving three pairs of lovers. The questions about sex and the proper balance between intellectual and physical attraction have no answers, but Ackerman has some interesting suggestions, and, to his credit, comedy outweighs the theorizing. John Rando, the director, has a good eye, and the evening comes off beautifully. (Promenade, Broadway at 76th St. 580-1313.)

This Lime Tree Bower—A delightful tale (by Conor McPherson, who also wrote "The Weir") of three young Irishmen, each of whom goes off the rails in various ways but is able to put his life back together again. Neatly told as a series of overlapping monologues, the evening is funny and sharply observed, and sweet without being sentimental. A perfect antithesis to this season's blockbusters. (Primary Stages, 354 W. 45th St. 333-4052. Closes June 27.)

Thwak—Comic acrobatics (both physical and vocal) from the Australian performers David Collins and Shane Dundas, a.k.a. the Umbilical Brothers. (Minetta Lane Theatre, 18 Minetta Lane, east of Sixth Ave., between W. 3rd and Bleecker Sts. 307-4100.)

Vicki Sue Robinson: Behind the Beat—A biographical revue starring the former disco queen. (Kaufman, 534 W. 42nd St. 239-6200.)

The Weir—Conor McPherson's play takes place in the musty chill of a backwater Irish pub, where a handful of habitués chew the cud of their solitude, spinning ghostly yarns that fill the air with glimmers of fear and resignation. It has a bittersweet charm, but for all the well-crafted talk and the well-observed bonhomie, it is finally a shaggy-bog story. (4/12/99) (Walter Kerr, 219 W. 48th St. 239-6200.)

Wild Nights with Emily—Madeleine Olnek's comedy is a satire of the spinster stereotype, in which Emily Dickinson (Deb Margolin) is involved in a love affair with her sister-in-law. Thursdays through Saturdays, through June 26. (Wow Café, 59 E. 4th St. 777-4280.)

Wonderland—A comedy-drama by Julia Dahl, set in Sag Harbor, about a group of politically minded members of Generation X. (American Place, 111 W. 46th St. 239-6200.)

LONG RUNS

ART: Royale, 242 W. 45th St. 239-6200. . . . **BEAUTY AND THE BEAST:** Palace, Broadway at 47th St. 307-4100. . . . **BLUE MAN GROUP/TUBES:** Astor Place Theatre, 434 Lafayette St. 254-4370. . . . **CABARET:** Studio 54, at 254 W. 54th St. 239-6200. . . . **CATS:** Winter Garden, Broadway at 50th St. 239-6200. . . . **CHICAGO:** Shubert, 225 W. 44th St. 239-6200. . . . **DE LA GUARDA:** Daryl Roth, 20 Union Sq. E., at 15th St. 239-6200. . . . **THE FANTASTICKS:** Sullivan Street Playhouse, 181 Sullivan St., at Bleecker St. 674-3838. . . . **FOOTLOOSE:** Richard Rodgers, 226 W. 46th St. 307-4100. . . . **FORBIDDEN BROADWAY:** Stardust, Broadway at 51st St. 239-6200. . . . **HEDWIG AND THE ANGRY INCH:** Jane Street Theatre, Hotel Riverview Ballroom, 113 Jane St. 239-6200. . . . **I LOVE YOU, YOU'RE PERFECT, NOW CHANGE:** Westside, 407 W. 43rd St. 239-6200. . . . **JEKYLL & HYDE:** Plymouth, 236 W. 45th St. 239-6200. . . . **KILLER JOE:** SoHo Playhouse, 15 Vandam St. 239-6200. (Closes June 27.) . . . **LATE-NITE CATECHISM:** St. Luke's Church, 308 W. 46th St. 239-6200. . . . **THE LION KING:** New Amsterdam, 214 W. 42nd St. 307-4100. . . . **LES MISÉRABLES:** Imperial, 249 W. 45th St. 239-6200. . . . **MISS SAIGON:** Broadway Theatre, Broadway at 53rd St. 239-6200. . . . **THE MYSTERY OF IRMA VEP:** Westside, 407 W. 43rd St. 239-6200. . . . **OVER THE RIVER AND THROUGH THE WOODS:** John Houseman, 450 W. 42nd St. 239-6200. . . . **PERFECT CRIME:** Duffy, 1553 Broadway, at 46th St. 695-3401. . . . **THE PHANTOM OF THE OPERA:** Majestic, 245 W. 44th St. 239-6200. . . . **RAGTIME:** Ford Center for the Performing Arts, 213 W. 42nd St. 307-4100. . . . **RENT:** Nederlander, 208 W. 41st St. 921-8000. . . . **SECRETS EVERY SMART TRAVELER SHOULD KNOW:** Ibis, 327 W. 44th St. 239-6200. . . . **SIDE MAN:** Golden, 252 W. 45th St. 239-6200. . . . **SMOKEY JOE'S CAFÉ:** Virginia, 245 W. 52nd St. 239-6200. . . . **THE SOUND OF MUSIC:** Martin Beck, 302 W. 45th St. 239-6200. (Closes June 27.) . . . **STOMP:** Orpheum, 126 Second Ave., at St. Marks Pl. 477-2477. . . . **SYMPHONIE FANTASTIQUE:** HERE, 145 Sixth Ave., near Spring St. 647-0202. . . . **TONY N' TINA'S WEDDING:** St. Luke's Church, 308 W. 46th St. 239-6200. . . . **WIT:** Union Square Theatre, 100 E. 17th St. 307-4100.

DANCE

New York City Ballet—Final performances of the season. June 16 at 8: "River of Light," "Ives, Songs," and "Glass Pieces." . . . ¶ June 17 at 8: "River of Light," "The Unanswered Question," and "Glass Pieces." . . . ¶ June 18 at 8: "Fancy Free," "The Unanswered Question," and "Fearful Symmetries." . . . ¶ June 19 at 2: "Them Twos," "The Unanswered Question," and "West Side Story Suite." . . . ¶ June 19 at 8: "Glass Pieces," "Ives, Songs," and "I'm Old-Fashioned." . . . ¶ June 20 at 3: "Who Cares?," "Western Symphony," and "Stars and Stripes." . . . ¶ June 22-25 at 8, June 26 at 2 and 8, and June 27 at 3: "Midsummer Night's Dream." (New York State Theatre. 870-5570.)

S.O.S

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American Ballet Theatre—Final performances of the season. June 14-15 at 8 and June 16 at 2 and 8: "The Snow Maiden." . . . ¶ June 17-18 at 8 and June 19 at 2 and 8: "Don Quixote." (Metropolitan Opera House. 362-6000.)

Monte/Brown Dance—The former Elisa Monte dance troupe recognizes the increasing contributions of David Brown with its new name and two new programs, which comprise works choreographed, both separately and together, by the husband-and-wife team. (Joyce Theatre, 175 Eighth Ave., at 19th St. 242-0800. June 15-19 at 8 and June 20 at 2 and 7:30.)

Peter Pucci Plus—The onetime phys-ed major turned Pilobolus dancer combines his passions in a program of terpsichorean turns on baseball, hockey, hoops, surfing, badminton, Frisbee, and so on. (Joyce Theatre, 175 Eighth Ave., at 19th St. 242-0800. June 22-25 at 8, June 26 at 2 and 8, and June 27 at 2 and 7:30.)

"Silver Series: Volume Three"—The final installment of Danspace Project's twenty-fifth anniversary celebration features choreography by Yoshiko Chuma ("5 Car Pile-Up"), Neil Greenberg ("Stage Gun Dance"), Tere O'Connor ("Boy, Boy, Giant, Baby"), Ruth St. Denis ("Gold Madonna"), and Stephen Petronio ("Adrift"). (St. Mark's In-the-Bouwerie, Second Ave. at 10th St. 674-8194. June 18-20 at 8:30.)

Anna Myer and Dancers—The nine-member troupe presents four works, including "Take Ten," a dance that weaves in movement phrases by ten choreographers. (St. Mark's In-the-Bouwerie, Second Ave. at 10th St. 674-8194. June 24-27 at 8:30.)

Pepatian—The choreographer Merián Soto and her Bronx-based company team up with the fifteen-piece salsa band Adalberto Alvarez y Su Son, for the première of "Asi Se Baila un Son (How to Dance a Son)," followed by "Pelea de Gallos (The Cock Fight)," a duet for a man and woman in cock suits. (Central Park SummerStage, Rumsey Playfield, mid-Park at 72nd St. June 16-18 at 7:30. No tickets necessary.)

Cortez & Co.—The former Paul Taylor dancer Hernando Cortez offers three premières, "Planet Soup," "A Twist of Fate," and "Inner Eye." (Limelight Theatre, 47 W. 20th St. 924-0077. June 16-18 at 7.)

"Strange Fruit and Other Secrets"—Paz Tanjuaquio and Paz Danz present an evening-length work about ethnicity triggered by memories the choreographer had when she tasted local fruits—rambutan, mangosteen, lanzones—in a visit to the Philippines. (Merce Cunningham Studio, 55 Bethune St. 924-0077. June 17-19 at 9.)

"Alter Egomania"—A split bill of works by Carrie Ahern ("Undone," "Raw(hide)") and Jennifer A. Cooper ("Perpetual Gertrude," "Saturday Night Sing Along With Mitch"). (Merce Cunningham Studio, 55 Bethune St. 924-0077. June 25 at 9 and June 26-27 at 8.)

Myoung Sook Kim Dance Company—The six-member troupe from Ewha Women's University, in Seoul, blend traditional and contemporary styles in six court and folk dances. (Asia Society, 725 Park Ave. 517-2742. June 26 at 8.)

OUT OF TOWN

Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival—June 23-24 at 8, June 25-26 at 8:30, and June 27 at 2: Grupo Corpo Brazilian Dance. (Becket Mass. For information about tickets, call 413-243-0745.)

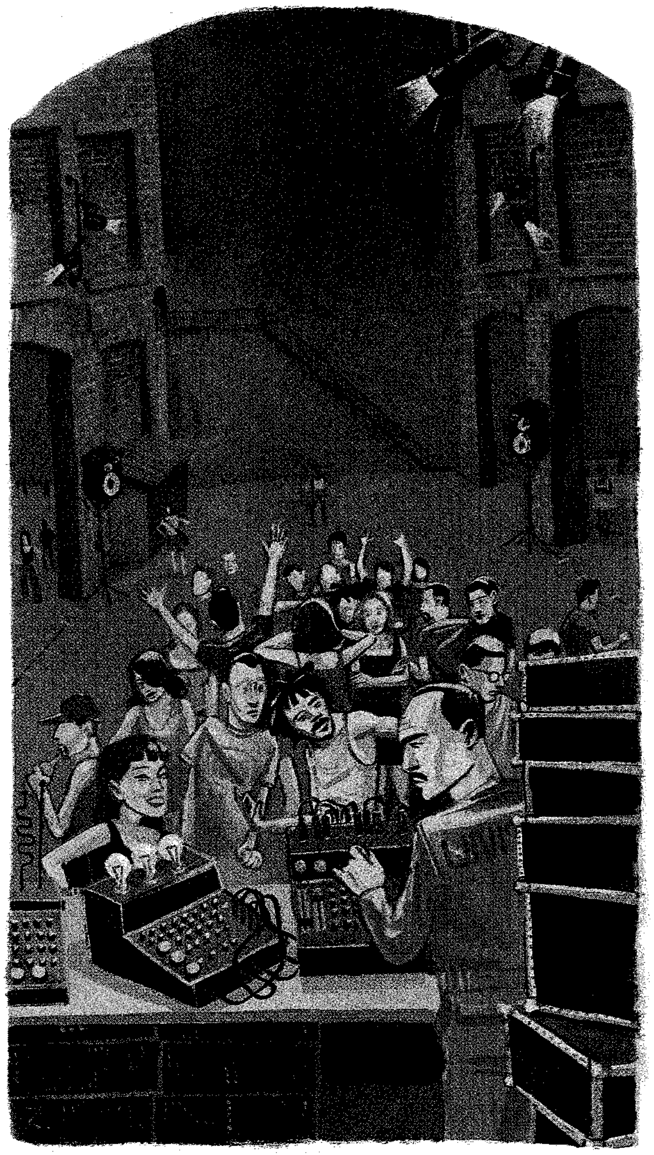
NIGHT LIFE

CONCERTS

Central Park SummerStage—Free concerts in New York City's back yard. June 16-18 at 7:30: Jubilant Cuban salsa with Adalberto Álvarez y Su Son. . . . ¶ June 19 at 3: The Sugarhill Gang presents a kid's concert. . . . ¶ June 20 at 3: They Might Be Giants take over on Father's Day. . . . ¶ June 24 at 7: The piano-driven trio Ben Folds Five gives a benefit concert. . . . ¶ June 26 at 1:30: Trumpeter Hugh Masekela goes grazing in the grass, and Detroit d.j. Carl Craig (see also Creative Time's Music in the Anchorage) leads his Innerzone Orchestra. . . . ¶ June 27 at 3: Trinidadian calypso monarch Ronnie McIntosh. (Rumsey Playfield, mid-Park at 72nd St. 360-2777.)

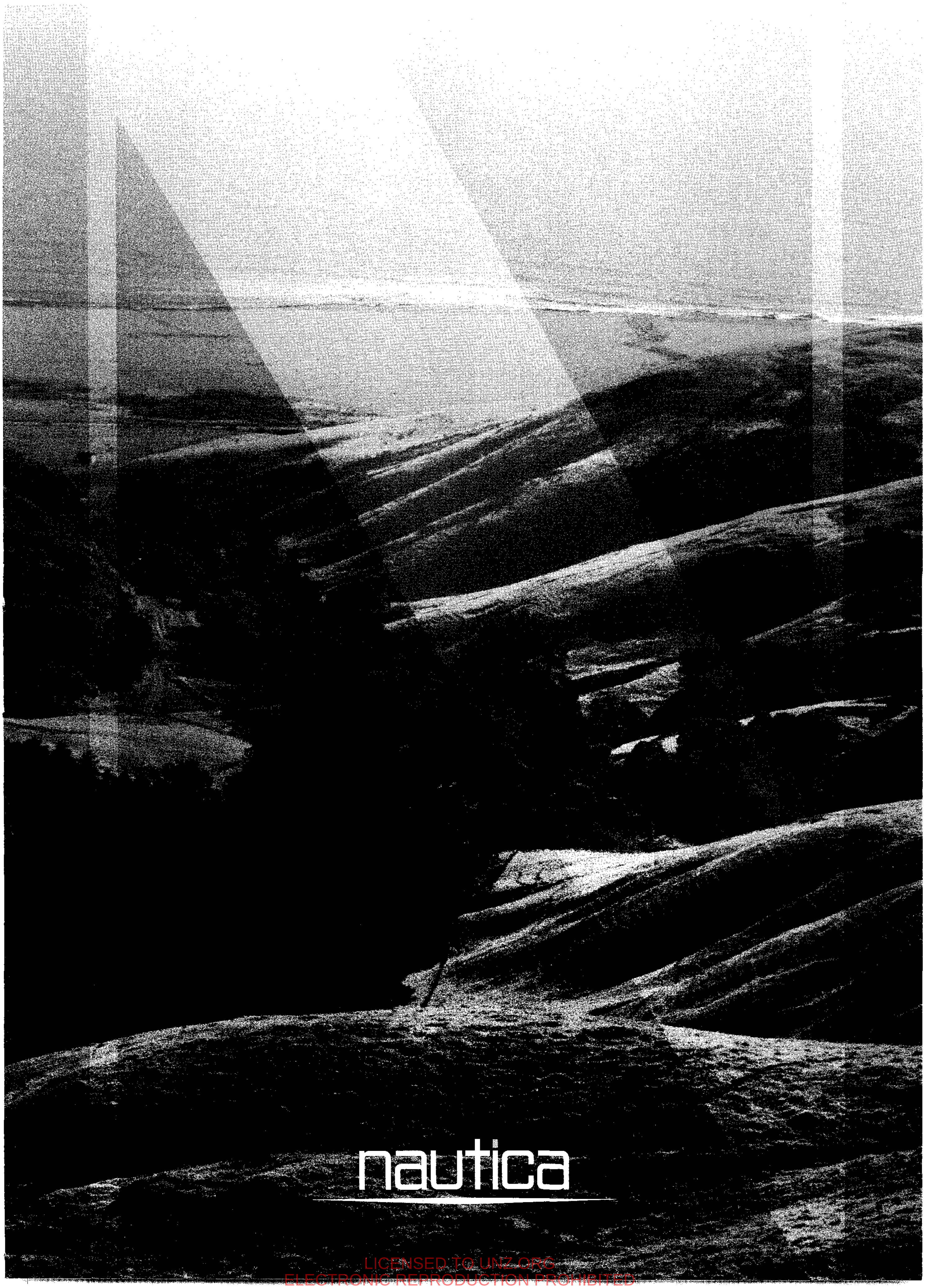
Creative Time's Music in the Anchorage—The cavernous stone chambers inside the base of the Brooklyn Bridge come alive for a week with the sounds of electronic music. For the uninitiated, understanding the distinctions between these performers and their respective genres can be as difficult as configuring your own Web server. The series's curator, twenty-three-year-old Kevin McHugh, selected the participants because they operate "outside the stylistic paradigms of the genres of house, hip-hop, and drum and bass." But their tunes always have a "deep, deep groove potential," McHugh says. June 17 at 9: Trip-hop master DJ E.A.S.E., of Nightmares on Wax, heads a bill that includes the sexy sounds of Khan and the drum-and-bass specialist Jega. . . . ¶ June 18 at 10: The German creative force Funkstörung join their compatriot Shantel and local acts Liminal and Ming & F S. . . . ¶ June 19 at 9: Caipirinha Music presents a night of mostly ambient sounds. . . . ¶ June 25 at 10: The much-in-demand English d.j. Andrea Parker, Lloop of the electronica group We, and the jazz-leaning d.j. Jonah Sharp (a.k.a. Spacetime Continuum). . . . ¶ June 26 at 10: Local party promoters Koncrete Jungle present the English jungle pioneer A Guy Called Gerald, legendary Detroit techno d.j. Carl Craig (see also Central Park SummerStage), and Nigerian d.j. Jerome Sydenham, who specializes in bringing African influences to bear on house music. (Cadman Plaza West, at Hicks and Front Sts., Brooklyn. For more information, call 206-6674, ext. 252.)

JVC Jazz Festival—Pianist **herbie hancock** and saxophonist **wayne shorter** have been musical associates since their time as bandmates in Miles Davis's legendary sixties quintet. If "1+1," the 1997 duet recording that last united these two modern-jazz icons, was a bit sedate, a live get-together still holds the promise of deep invention and penetrating lyricism. The neo-hard-bop quintet of the exuberant trumpeter **roy hargrove** opens for the duo. (Carnegie Hall. 247-7800. June 18 at 8.) . . . ¶ Two of our most popular vocal stylists, **cassandra wilson** and **shirley horn,** shower love on the same man: Miles Davis. Expressiveness will be the rule. (Carnegie Hall. June 19 at 8.) . . . ¶ Alfred Hitchcock's "Anatomy of a Murder" would have been a terrific film without Ellington and Strayhorn's score, but that kicking music certainly didn't hurt. Prior to a screening of the film in Bryant Park, trumpeter **terence blanchard** digs into themes that he explored earlier this year on his exceptional "Jazz in Film." (Sixth Ave. at 42nd St. June 21 at 7.) . . . ¶ **james moody,** a lusty and skilled saxophonist who came up in the late forties right on the heels of his idol, Charlie Parker, is the ideal soloist for a program that re-creates the "Bird and Strings" recordings that included the beautiful Parker improvisations in "Just Friends" and others. (Symphony Space, Broadway at 95th St. 864-5400. June 21 at 8.) . . . ¶ Miles Davis's "Kind of Blue," one of the most celebrated of all jazz albums, will be re-created by an all-star ensemble including pianist **geri allen,** trumpeter **wallace roney,** saxophonist **ravi coltrane,** and drummer **jimmy cobb,** the only surviving member from Davis's original 1959 band. (Symphony Space. June 22 at 7:30.) . . . ¶ The blue-chip show of the festival presents two jazz superstars: the suave saxophonist **joshua redman** and the refined vocalist-pianist **diana krall.** (Carnegie Hall. June 23 at 8.) . . . ¶ Bass-ist's bassist **dave holland** demands vitality from his ensembles—and, with the exceptional saxophonist **chris potter** on hand, this group will have plenty of it. Pianist **brad mehldau,** on the other hand (playing solo here), can become listless when his introspective tendencies go unchecked. (Symphony Space. June 23 at 8.) . . . ¶ A jazz force of nature, pianist **oscar peterson** continues to dazzle. (Carnegie Hall. June 24 at 8.) . . . ¶ **ray charles,** still the man. With the Royal Crown Review. (Avery Fisher Hall. 875-5030. June 25 at 8.) . . . ¶ Pianist Kenny Kirkland, who died of a drug overdose last fall, was as com-



Creative Time brings electronica to the Brooklyn Bridge.

ZOHAR LAZAR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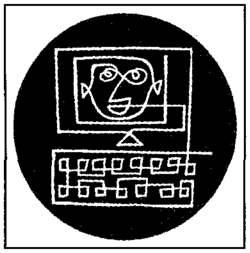
fortable playing modern jazz as he was fleshing out sophisticated pop music. Former bosses **BRANFORD MARSALIS** and **STING,** as well as friends and bandmates including **HARRY CONNICK, JR.,** and drummer **JEFF WATTS** salute the accomplished keyboard player. (Beacon Theatre, Broadway at 74th St. 496-7070. June 25 at 8.) . . . ¶ The wondrous Brazilian singer-songwriter **CAETANO VELOSO** can bewitch an audience with just his acoustic guitar and enchanting voice, but here he'll have assistance from a few choice accompanists. (Beacon Theatre. June 27 at 8.) . . . ¶ A world-music ensemble before the term was invented, **SHAKTI** brought fusion guitarist John McLaughlin together with Indian master musicians including the dazzling percussionist Zakir Hussain. Their long-awaited reunion will feature flying fingers, pounding palms, and jaw-dropping interplay. (Symphony Space. June 27 at 8.) For more information about the festival, call 501-1390.

MIKE NESS—The husky-voiced Social Distortion guitarist indulges his roots-rock leanings. His new solo album, "Cheating at Solitaire," includes covers of Bob Dylan's "Don't Think Twice" and Hank Williams's "You Win Again." Who said you can't go home again? (Town Hall, 123 W. 43rd St. 840-2824. June 17 at 8.)

ONLY CONNECT



BOLD TYPE (www.boldtype.com)—Bold Type has the look and feel of a small literary magazine, albeit one with big-time connections (à la *Granta*). The site's uncommercial appeal, though, comes courtesy of its commercial nature: Bold Type is a labor of love produced by a handful of Random House employees, who have the luxury of drawing on their sponsor's stable of writers (Richard Price, Alice McDermott, Martin Amis, et al.) without the encumbrance of the usual click-here/buy-now hype at R.H.'s official site, Books@Random.com (which you'd think would be one spot where you could escape the "Phantom Menace" juggernaut; wrong). Monthly issues are organized by theme (therapy, justice, faith, etc.) and include excerpts from current titles as well as original essays by the authors, audio readings, and, occasionally, pieces from unpublished writers.

This clean, well-lighted site (designed by Oven Digital) serves as a sort of on-line sampler. While the brief synopses vary in quality (and none are expressly negative), the excerpts, interviews, and readings allow the curious to dip their toes into whatever fresh pond appeals. Perhaps you've heard of David Gates, Pulitzer finalist and acclaimed short-story writer? In the current issue ("Identity"), you can read an unsettling short story ("A Wronged Husband") from his current collection, "The Wonders of the Invisible World," as well as an interview with the author. Though the theme bins that stories are dumped into can seem arbitrary (both Anne Lamott and James Ellroy are included in a back issue entitled "Realities"; her piece centers around a folksy Jesus, while he's obsessed with his dead mother's grisly, unsolved murder), the talent on display is of a consistently high quality, and the authors speak in vibrant and immediate voices.

BRIAN WILSON—In the 1995 documentary "I Just Wasn't Made for These Times," Wilson looked distracted and disturbed; his recent appearances, however, have been more upbeat, more like the musings of an overly playful child (with attention-deficit issues). This show promises to be transcendent, heartbreaking, or both. (Beacon Theatre, Broadway at 74th St. 496-7070. June 18 at 8.)

JOHN MELLENCAMP—Like his longtime chart rival Tom Petty, Mellencamp recently emerged from a lengthy hiatus, turned in a fine record, "John Mellencamp," and discovered the painful truth that the pop charts are hopelessly ageist. Having seen his rock-star status downgraded, the Little Bastard (as he affectionately refers to himself) will be in his best attention-getting form. With the great roots rockers Son Volt. (Jones Beach Theatre. 516-221-1000. June 18 at 8.)

LINCOLN CENTER JAZZ ORCHESTRA—Expect plenty of Ellington from a well-versed ensemble that's spending all of this year communing with the spirit of the master. (Great Hill, Central Park. No tickets necessary. June 19 at 5.)

JOURNEY / FOREIGNER—Summer sounds circa 1980. Don't stop believin'. (Beacon Theatre, Broadway at 74th St. 496-7070. June 22 at 7. . . . ¶ Jones Beach Theatre. June 27 at 7.)

MIDSUMMER NIGHT SWING—Dancing under the stars returns to Lincoln Center, starting June 23 at 8:15, with Vince Giordano and the Nighthawks laying down a swing beat. Trumpeter Nicholas Payton lends a hand. . . . ¶ June 24: at 8:15: The Tulla Ceili Band, from County Clare, Ireland, spins out some jigs and reels. . . . ¶ June 25 at 8:15: Accordion-driven merengue with the Joaquin Diaz ensemble and salsa with José (El Canario) Alberto. . . . ¶ June 26 at 8:15: Salsa dancing to the sounds of Guaco, a twenty-piece band from Venezuela, and *plena* and *bomba* music by New York City's own Viento de Agua. . . . ¶ June 29 at 8:15: Lindy hopping to the Count Basie Orchestra. (Dance lessons are given each evening at 6:30. For more information, call 875-5766.)

SEAL—The pop and soul singer. (Jones Beach Theatre. June 24 at 8.)

GUINNESS FLEADH—The movable Irish rock feast, with Elvis Costello, former Pogue Shane MacGowan, former Pixie Frances Black, former Fairport Conventioneer Richard Thompson, authentic Irish Celtic pop group Altan, the pub rockers Black 47, honorary Irishmen Hootie and the Blowfish, the local pop outfit the Candy Butchers, and the great Joycean singer-songwriter Lucinda Williams, among others. (Downing Stadium, Randall's Island. 307-7171. June 26 starting at 11 A.M.)

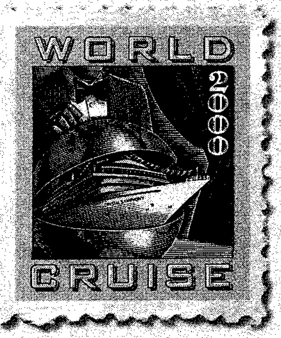
CLUBS

(A highly arbitrary listing, in which boldface type indicates some of the more notable performers in town. Musicians and night-club proprietors live complicated lives; it's advisable to call ahead to confirm engagements.)

BOTTOM LINE, 15 W. 4th St., at Mercer St. (228-6300)—June 17: **DAVID JOHANSEN AND THE HARRY SMITHS.** The man who also goes by the name Buster Poindexter and who once led the New York Dolls tries on another hat with his latest project, a folk-music band that got its name from the collector who put together the seminal "Anthology of American Folk Music" back in 1952. June 19: Samples alumni **SEAN KELLY** and **ROB SOMERS.**

BOWERY BALLROOM, 6 Delancey St. (533-2111)—June 23: **THE PRETENDERS.** With a new record due out this fall, Chrissie Hynde returns to a pop landscape in which her glorious contributions are no longer quite so meaningful. Still, she has one of the great rock voices of all time and an incomparable flair for black eyeliner. June 26: **SOUTHERN CULTURE ON THE SKIDS,** a group of psychobilly swamp rockers from Chapel Hill.

BROWNIES, 169 Avenue A, at 10th St. (420-8392)—June 16: A fine night of roots rock with the **V-ROYS** and **THE DAMNATIONS.** June 22: The women of **CAKE LIKE,** guitarist Nina Hellman, bassist Kerri Kenney, and drummer Jody Seifert all have second careers: actress,



GOODBYE
OLD MILLENNIUM,
HELLO *NEW.*

On January 20, 2000, Crystal Symphony will depart Los Angeles to circle the globe for 104 days. This extraordinary voyage features 11 maiden calls, including Lima, Easter Island, Zanzibar, and Bom Bom Island Resort. Land programs include the Galápagos Islands, Machu Picchu and African game parks. Voyages of 22 to 35 days are also available. Sail with Crystal Cruises and see why, in readers' polls, we've been voted "World's Best Large Cruise Line" by *Travel & Leisure* and "Best Large-Ship Line" by *Condé Nast Traveler.* Call your travel agent or contact us at 1-800-820-6663 or www.crystalcruises.com for a free World Cruise brochure.

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actress, and fashion designer, respectively. But that hasn't kept them from putting together three rocking albums, the latest of which, "Goodbye, So What," is full of clever hooks, witty songwriting, and mean playing. "Don't quit your day job" is a crack you'll never hear at one of their shows.

Coney Island High, 15 St. Marks Pl. (674-7959)—June 19: **DAVE DAVIES,** a Kinks stalwart but never the star, continues his new career as a front man, and he easily carries the weight. He now sings a strong lead instead of high harmony, his power guitar is still one of rock's wonders, and his demeanor in the spotlight is relaxed and assured.

Irving Plaza, 17 Irving Pl., at 15th St. (777-6800)— June 16-17 and June 20: **PAVEMENT.** The oblique champions of knotty indie guitar rock, still incapable of selling records in high volume (but unmatched when it comes to charming critics), gear up for a three-night New York invasion. June 18: Former Doors guitarist **ROBBY KRIEGER** plays with his band. June 21: **VONDA SHEPARD,** the singer-songwriter best known for her narrative-advancing perfomances on "Ally McBeal."

Knitting Factory, 74 Leonard St., between Broadway and Church St. (219-3055)—June 16: **JULES SHEAR,** a witty and vastly underappreciated singer-songwriter in the Costello/Parker mold, whose songs have been big hits for lesser artists. June 25-26 and June 28: **DIAMANDA GALÁS.** For those who don't belong to the cult of Galás, her bilingual ululation suggests a woman alternately possessed by the spirits of Tina Turner, Yoko Ono, and an S & M dominatrix. Recently, Galás released "Malediction & Prayer," a live album of songs made popular by the Supremes, B. B. King, Billie Holiday, and others. It's her most accessible work to date.

Maxwell's, 1039 Washington St., Hoboken (201-798-0406)—June 17: **THE V-ROYS** (see Brownies). June 20: **DAVE DAVIES** (see Coney Island High).

Mercury Lounge, 217 E. Houston St. (260-4700)—June 18: **GARY LUCAS,** the much-in-demand downtown guitarist (he's played with Leonard Bernstein, Captain Beefheart, Jeff Buckley, and Joan Osborne) leads his trio Gods and Monsters.

Tonic, 107 Norfolk St. (358-7503)—June 20: The Leonard Cohen-like ballads of **JONATHAN SPOTTISWOODE.** June 24: **SCANNER** (a.k.a. Robin Rimbaud) is listening: the electronic-music master captures live cellular-phone conversations out of the airways, which he then incorporates into his music. It can be a hit-or-miss affair, but it leaves you thinking.

JAZZ AND STANDARDS

Algonquin Hotel, 59 W. 44th St. (840-6800)—Through June 19: Flawless production, a wide range, focussed timbre, and impeccable pitch are guaranteed throughout **MAUREEN MC GOVERN'S** imaginative program; highlights include a complex arrangement of Gershwin's "The Man I Love," a brutal rendition of Sondheim's "Could I Leave You?," and an Ellington set that includes "On a Turquoise Cloud" (a rarely heard unaccompanied vocalise) and "Caravan" (in which Lee Musiker goes wild at the Baldwin). Vocalist **SUSANNAH MC CORKLE** takes over on June 22. Dining.

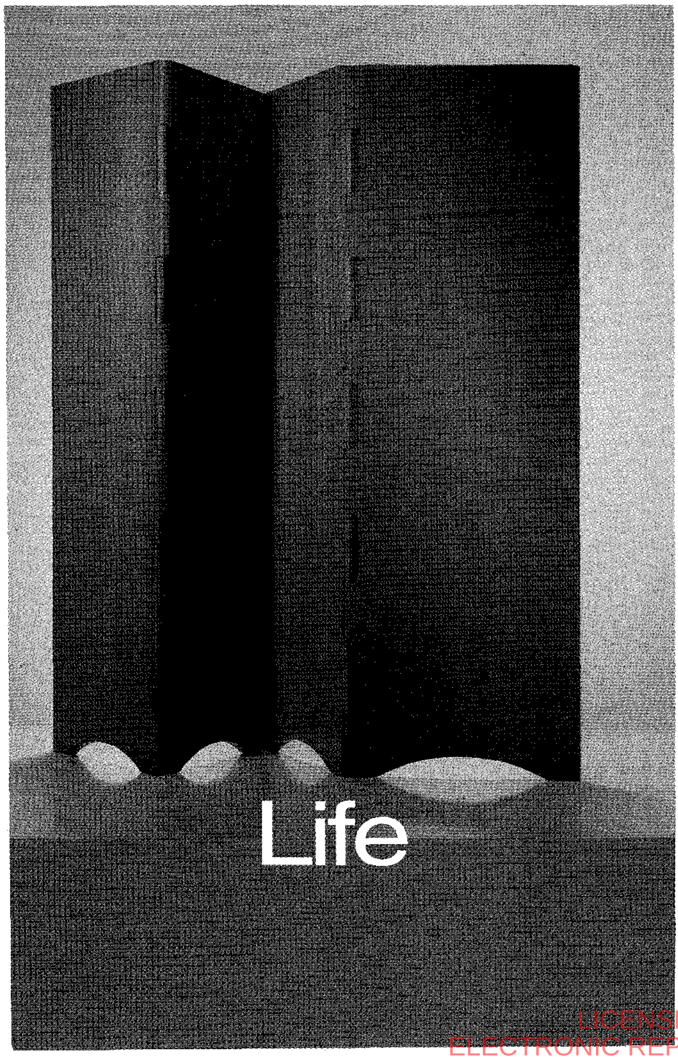
Carlyle Hotel, Madison Ave. at 76th St. (744-1600)—The Café Carlyle, a snug, windowless enclave in the doorman district, features discreet waiters, wraparound pastel murals, and, through June 26, **BOBBY SHORT.** . . . ¶ Across the hall, in Bemelmans Bar, **BARBARA CARROLL** is in attendance.

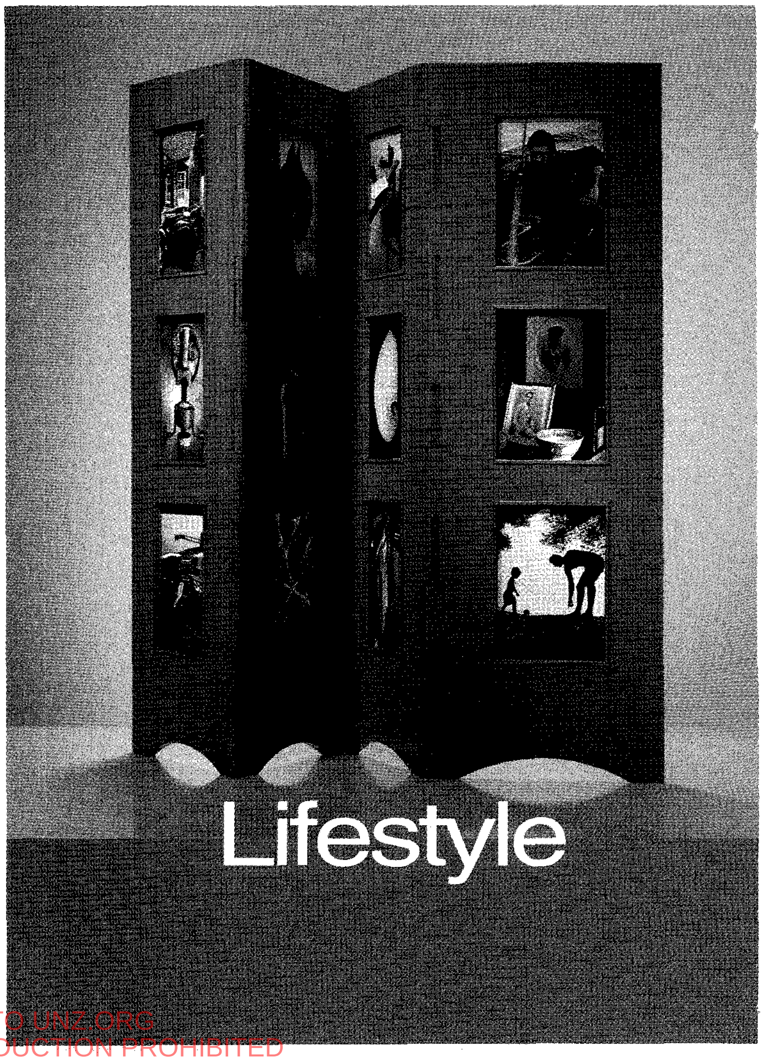
Jazz Standard, 116 E. 27th St. (576-2232)—June 16-20: Old-school pros all, pianist **ROLAND HANNA,** bassist **RICHARD DAVIS,** drummer **ANDREW CYRILLE,** and saxophonist and flutist **FRANK WESS** couldn't stop swinging even if they were paid to. Between them, they've worked with everyone from Count Basie and Ben Webster to Eric Dolphy and Cecil Taylor. June 23-27: The **CEDAR WALTON** trio. Pianist Walton has a touch of Clark Kent, a touch of Superman: beneath his mild-mannered surface is a jazzman of steely power and intelligence. He's also a terrific composer and an exacting bandleader. With a trio, his renowned improvising ought to gleam. Dining.

Knitting Factory, 74 Leonard St., between Broadway and Church St. (219-3055)—June 17: Drummer **JOEY BARON** can play with anyone, and seemingly has. When he gets together with other players who also blithely ignore musical pigeonholes, such as guitarist **MARC RIBOT** and keyboardist **JOHN MEDESKI,** a true meeting of skewed minds takes place. June 18-19: **DAVE DOUGLAS** scales down group size but not ambition with his Tiny Bell Trio. Tossing about new-jazz, Balkan, and classical motifs, trumpeter Douglas, drummer **JIM BLACK,** and guitarist **BRAD SHEPIK** have developed a musical language that's all their own.

Tonic, 107 Norfolk St. (358-7503)—If the fare at the Bell Atlantic and JVC jazz festivals has been too staid for your taste, head here for edgier sounds. From creative double bills (pianist **ANTHONY COLEMAN** and trumpeter **WADDA LEO SMITH** on June 18) and duos (pianist **MYRA MELFORD** and reedman **MARTY EHRLICH** on June 22) to experienced bands (**PACHORA** on June 16 and **WILLIAM PARKER AND THE LITTLE HUEY CREATIVE MUSIC ORCHESTRA** on June 24), this end-of-spring extravaganza is a welcome jolt of new jazz.

Village Vanguard, 178 Seventh Ave. S., at 11th St. (255-4037)—Through June 20: The **FRED HERSCH** trio. With his exquisite touch, sensitivity to texture, and poetic imagination, pianist Hersch brings to mind the late Bill Evans, the dean of modern jazz piano. Hersch has found his own voice, though—one that balances the pursuit of beauty with a penchant for experimentation. The **VANGUARD JAZZ ORCHESTRA** holds sway on Mondays.





ART

MUSEUMS AND LIBRARIES

Metropolitan Museum, Fifth Ave. at 82nd St. (879-5500)—"Prayerbook for a Queen: The Hours of Jeanne D'Evreux." Removed from their binding for the production of a lavish facsimile, approximately three dozen illustrated pages by one of the masters of medieval illumination, Jean Pucelle (active 1320-1334), are on view. The Met has thoughtfully provided magnifying glasses and a shelf to lean on while viewing these intricate, I.D.-card-size pages. The real treats are not Pucelle's religious scenes, skillfully cribbed from Italian models, but his more idiosyncratic marginalia. Slithering out from between lines of text are all kinds of mischievous miniature creatures: a monkey doing a handstand, a bearded old man pulling a rake across the page, and, most startlingly, a smooching couple emerging from the words "Sanctus Sanctus." Evidently, the widowed queen for whom the artist drew these drolleries saw nothing wrong with mixing a little licentious humor into her devotions. If she were around today, Jeanne would have been a passionate fan of Pucelle's successor, the great *Mad* magazine marginalist, Sergio Aragones. Through Aug. 29. . . . ¶ In an adjacent gallery, a related show called "Devotions and Diversions" gathers some of the finest northern-European books from the dawn of printmaking. Included are the Lubeck Bible, the Nuremberg chronicle, and two versions of a proto-coffee-table book, the "Peregrinatio in Terram Sanctam," one of which is opened to an amazing panoramic view of Venice, unfolded to a length of almost six feet. Together with the Medieval Housebook exhibition over at the Frick, these shows make for a remarkable immersion in the world of the late Middle Ages. Through Aug. 29. . . . ¶ "Cézanne to van Gogh: The Collection of Dr. Gachet." More than fifty works (by Monet, Pissarro, Guillaumin, Sisley, Renoir, and, above all, Cézanne and van Gogh) owned by van Gogh's doctor have travelled across the Atlantic for the first time. Through Aug. 15. . . . ¶ "Gustave Moreau: Between Epic and Dream." Through Aug. 22. (Open Tuesdays through Sundays, 9:30 to 5:30, and Friday and Saturday evenings until 9.)

Museum of Modern Art, 11 W. 53rd St. (708-9480)—"Collecting in Depth: Drawings by Grosz, Schwitters, Ernst, and Klee." In a nod to the barrage of drawing shows currently on view around Manhattan, MOMA's staff has put together an exhibition that casually proves who's top dog when it comes to twentieth-century works on paper. Each of the four artists represented gets a room to himself, and each room is crowded with delights and oddities. Schwitters, represented by almost forty works, including a handful of his finest abstract collages, steals the spotlight, but even Max Ernst, the Surrealist ideologue who should be the show's weak link, turns in a memorably lovely trifle, made from advertisements for panama hats. Through July 20. . . . ¶ "Alfred Hitchcock: Behind the Silhouette." Through Aug. 17. (Open Saturdays through Tuesdays, and Thursdays, 10:30 to 5:45; Fridays, 10:30 to 8:15.)

Guggenheim Museum, Fifth Ave. at 89th St. (423-3500)—"Surrealism: Two Private Eyes." A vast exhibition composed of work from the separate collections of publisher Daniel Filipacchi and the late Nesuhi Ertegun, who, as a partner with his brother Ahmet, owned Atlantic Records. The show is rich in terrific works, including such iconic Surrealist masterpieces as René Magritte's "The Rape" (1934), Salvador Dali's "The Phenomenon of Ecstasy" (1933), and Giorgio de Chirico's "The Disquieting Muses" (1925), and two astonishing rooms—one devoted to Cornell boxes, the other to Surrealist bookbinding. There is also a lot of marvellous or at the very least curious work by lesser-known artists. After viewing the extensive selection of drawings (and unfortunately rather modest group of photographs) by Hans Bellmer, one hopes for a major New York museum exhibition devoted to this very important "minor" Surrealist, an artist whose influence is still very much felt among contemporary artists (see Cindy Sherman's current show at Metro Pictures, for example). On the other hand, there is a lot of dreck, both by unknown figures and by famous ones having a bad art day. With its idiosyncratic view of the Surrealist movement, this somewhat cumbersome show nevertheless infuses the typically slow summer season with a jolt of energy. Through Sept. 12. (Open Sundays through Wednesdays, 9 to 6; Fridays and Saturdays, 9 to 8.)

Whitney Museum of American Art, Madison Ave. at 75th St. (570-3676)—"The American Century: Art & Culture 1900-2000 (Part I: 1900-50)." The first half of America's mid-career retrospective, installed on all five floors, includes Grant Wood's "American Gothic," Ben Shahn's "The Passion of Sacco and Vanzetti," Alfred Stieglitz's "The Steerage," Georgia O'Keeffe's "Summer Days," and Jackson Pollock's "Number 27." Through Aug. 22. (Open Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Fridays through Sundays, 11 to 6; Thursdays, 1 to 8.)

Brooklyn Museum of Art, Eastern Parkway (718-638-5000)—"Impressionists in Winter: Effets de Neige." Neither wind nor sleet nor driving snow could stop Monet and Co. More remarkably, neither can blizzards of hype and relentless overexposure. The paintings still look unbearably, dazzlingly good. Organized by the Phillips Collection, this smallish but satisfying selection leads us over

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slushy country roads, past frozen haystacks, and across rivers clogged with constellations of drifting ice that prefigure the "Water Lilies." Sadly, the era's single greatest winter scene—Monet's "Ice Floes on the Seine at Bougival," from the Musée d'Orsay—isn't here, but there are plenty of consolations, including a vigorous panorama of ice-skaters by Renoir, a flurry of breathtaking Sisleys, and a small, cozy room of Japanese prints, to remind us that those indomitable Frenchmen looked across the world as well as out the window. Through Aug. 29. . . . ¶ "Mariko Mori: Empty Dream" offers computer-generated photographs and installations by the Japanese artist. Through Aug. 15. (Open Tuesdays for the Impressionist show only, Wednesdays, and Fridays, 10 to 5; Thursdays, 10 to 8; Saturdays and Sundays, 11 to 6.)

American Museum of Natural History, Central Park W. at 79th St. (769-5100)—"Epidemic! The World of Infectious Disease." Through Sept. 6. . . . ¶ "The Endurance: Shackleton's Legendary Antarctic Expedition." Through Oct. 11. (Open daily, 10 to 5:45, and Friday and Saturday evenings until 8:45.)

Frick Collection, 1 E. 70th St. (288-0700)—For more than three hundred years, a manuscript known to scholars as the Medieval Housebook has belonged to the German house of Waldburg Wolfegg. A strange collection of military, metallurgical, and astrological texts in four languages, the manuscript probably dates from the late fifteenth century, but the identities of its illustrators remain a mystery. Whoever they were, they were fantastic: the panoramic renderings of military encampments, mining works, and courtly gardens are captivating, with plenty of tenderly observed and frequently bawdy details. Better still is a group of related drypoints by one of the likely Housebook suspects, known as the Master of the Amsterdam Cabinet. These include dogs scratching, peasants wrestling, and Aristotle humiliating himself for love, all drawn with a graphic delicacy that prefigures Dürer. The Wolfeggs have never loaned their treasures before, and probably won't again anytime soon, so this is a show not to be missed. Through July 25. (Open Tuesdays through Saturdays, 10 to 6; Sundays, 1 to 6.)

GALLERIES—UPTOWN

(Unless otherwise noted, galleries are open Tuesdays through Saturdays, from around 10 or 11 to between 5 and 6.)

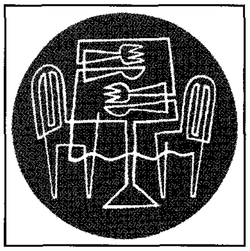
Carlos Alfonzo (1950-91)—Works from the last four years of this Cuban artist's life. At first glance, Alfonzo's dense fields of pictographs seem clogged and bewildering. Gradually, though, repeated motifs emerge: eyes, tears with nails through them, flailing hands, and knives. Some of these symbols apparently derive from Santería, the Afro-Cuban religion that Alfonzo practiced. There's an impressive urgency to the best works which recalls the stricken, myth-flavored maelstroms of early Pollock. Through June 30. (Adams, 41 W. 57th St. 644-5665.)

Georges Hugnet (1906-74)—A selection of collages, photomontages, and books by a lesser-known but interesting member of the Surrealist group. On the whole, these works have an agreeable, facile, echt-Surrealist look: nude women, floating lingerie, the occasional menacing light bulb. Perhaps the nicest thing here is the illustrated book Hugnet did in collaboration with Duchamp, "Le Septième Face du Dé" ("The Seventh Face of the Die") (1936). Through July 16. (Zabriskie, 41 E. 57th St. 752-1223.)

Alice Trumbull Mason (1904-71)—A small retrospective of the career of this crafty and appealing painter, who was one of the guiding spirits behind the American Abstract Artists. Her earlier works owe something to Miró: curving sicklelike lines divide areas of spectral color. In the later paintings, curves gradually drop out of the repertoire and her compositions grow elegantly Mondrianesque. Perhaps the finest piece here is the latest, a snazzy 1969 arrangement of rectangles, "Paradox No. 3, Luminous." Through July 23. (Washburn, 20 W. 57th St. 397-6780.)

The Paint Group—There's something likably boneheaded about this clique of eight earnest young reactionaries, who meet every month to assign each other subjects like "Nature Tamed," which they paint in their best academic manner. The results—mostly cluttered still-lifes in raking light—show skill and chutzpah, but they rarely sustain one's first rush of perverse enthusiasm. Through June 25. (Hirschl & Adler, 21 E. 70th St. 535-8810.)

TABLES FOR TWO



Estiatorio Milos, 125 W. 55th St. (245-7400)—"Don't ask what's fresh," the waiter says. "Get up." He leads you through the restaurant to the spotlighted fish display—silvery royal dorado, two-tone *loup de mer*, Copper River salmon, and representatives from a few other glittering schools whose nameplates in the crushed ice offer no help at all (*salpes, fagri*). "See there," he says, pointing. "That was swimming in Greece this morning."

Like the five-foot amphora in the foyer of this midtown spot, such gruff efficiency is a sort of judicious relic of the no-frills tradition of Greek-American restaurants. Otherwise, the atmosphere at Milos is international corporate-relaxed: double-height ceilings, cement walls tinted a shade of Armani gray that goes with anything you wear. There's a wide view of the stainless-steel kitchen, offering glimpses of rising flames and busy cooks, but the focal point of the room is that bed of fish. Staff hover by the scale, wrangling lobsters, hewing salmon steaks, providing I.D. ("*Fagri* is a Greek version of snapper"), weighing your final choice. (The by-the-pound price is steep, but since the average fish weighs a hefty pound and a half, the waiters encourage sharing.)

Back at the table, the appetizers—a tomato salad with cucumbers and feta, or the Milos special, a golden mound of petal-thin fried zucchini with a tzatziki dip—establish a standard of simple presentation and Aegean freshness. You can make an excellent meal on these alone. There's a fine selection of wines, but the short list of Greek vintages, the Viognier from Skouras or the lightly resinated Malamatina retsina (with a twist-off top!), complement the stalwart flavors with the right tang.

A congenial milling enlivens the spacious room—a trio of tall movie stars breezes in; murmuring shipping magnates huddle while their dates wait at the table like so many Penelopes—but few patrons remain distracted after the arrival of the fish. The seasoning is austere (as simple as fresh oregano or lemon and olive oil), so the true flavors come through: the meaty salmon tastes wild, not farmed, and the crispy, lightly floured *barbouni* evokes memories of cookouts on the beach. (Open weekdays for lunch and dinner, weekends for dinner only. Fish and seafood $25-$34 a pound; other entrées $24-$34.)

Short List—**JOHN ALEXANDER** and **TOMÁS SANCHEZ,** Marlborough, 40 W. 57th St. 541-4900. Open Mondays; both shows through June 26. . . . **JOSEPH BEUYS,** Werner, 21 E. 67th St. 988-1623. Open Mondays; through July 9. . . . **ERIC FISCHL,** Boone, 745 Fifth Ave., at 57th St. 752-2929. Through June 26. . . . **CHARLES HENRI FORD,** Ubu, 16 E. 78th St. 794-4444. Through July 2. . . . **ADRIANE HERMAN,** Baumgold, 128 E. 72nd St. 861-7338. Through July 30. . . . **ELLSWORTH KELLY,** Mitchell-Innes & Nash, 1018 Madison Ave., at 78th St. 744-7400. Through June 26. . . . **ODD NERDRUM,** Forum, 745 Fifth Ave., at 57th St. 355-4545. Through July 30. . . . **MAY STEVENS,** Ryan, 24 W. 57th St. 397-0669. Through Aug. 27. . . . **JIM TOUCHTON,** Fischbach, 24 W. 57th St. 759-2345. Through June 26.

GALLERIES—CHELSEA

Aki Fujiyoshi—"Recent Impressions," an appealingly arm's-length installation that presents scattered evidence—photographs of bedstand mess, thumbprints on a beer bottle, casts of household miscellany—meant to establish the artist's existence. This droll project includes the season's best vitrine: an array of mundane objects cast in forensic clay (a half-eaten candy bar, a phone jack, a butane lighter) and placed on a floor plan of the artist's apartment. It's an unsettling wealth of detail, at once intimate and impersonal, like a cross between "Homicide" and Rachel Whiteread. Through June 26. (AC Project Room, 453 W. 17th St. 645-4970.)

Short List—**SLATER BRADLEY,** Team, 527 W. 26th St. 279-9219. Through July 2. . . . **SAINT CLAIR CEMIN,** Cheim & Read, 521 W. 23rd St. 242-7727. Through July 31. . . . **LIZ LARNER,** 303 Gallery, 525 W. 22nd St. 255-1121. Through June 26. . . . **YOUNG SUN LIM,** Liebman Magnan, 552 W. 24th St. 255-3225. Through June 26. . . . **MICHAEL PAHA,** Feigen, 535 W. 20th St. 929-0500. Through July 30. . . . **TONY SMITH,** Cooper, 534 W. 21st St. 255-1105. Through July 15. . . . **RIRKRIT TIRAVANIJA,** Gavin Brown's Enterprise, 436 W. 15th St. 627-5258. Through Aug. 31. . . . **MARIANNE WEIL,** Conde, 529 W. 20th St. 691-9866. Through June 19. . . . **TERRY WINTERS,** Marks, 522 W. 22nd St. 243-0200. Through June 25. . . . **HIRO YAMAGATA,** Marlborough, 211 W. 19th St. 463-8634. Through June 25.

GALLERIES—DOWNTOWN

Sara Garden Armstrong—"Marking Time," large drawings inspired by the coasts of Brittany and Long Island. Using sketches and her own photographs as raw materials, Armstrong has attempted to integrate the very different qualities of these coasts—the former severely rocky, the latter rather soft and delicate—within a single drawing. The over-all effect is pleasantly abstract. Through June 30. (Gibson, 568 Broadway. 925-1192.)

Toba Khedoori—Large-scale works on paper. Khedoori's meticulously rendered pictures of deserted cities, empty chairs, and ominous doors suggest a late-twentieth-century version of de Chirico's *pittura metafisica*. Nothing is happening in these drawings—hence, something terrible is happening just out of sight, or will happen very soon. Boo! Through July 10. (Zwirner, 43 Greene St. 966-9074.)

"Arrested Ambition"—Curator Gregory Williams investigates a perennially popular modernist theme—failure—as it is played out in works by Art & Language, Sheila Pepe, Olav Westphalen, Jenny Perlin, and Michael Smith. It should come as no surprise that failure's genre should so often be comedy. Smith's video "How to Curate Your Own Group Exhibition" (1996) depicts the artist shuffling cards with his own name and the names of other, very famous artists written on them. A droll comment on art-world politics and frustrated ambitions. Through June 26. (Apex Art, 291 Church St. 431-5270.)

Short List—**EDUARDO ABAROA,** Tilton, 49 Greene St. 941-1775. Through July 3. . . . **BARTON LIDICE BENEŠ,** Lennon, Weinberg, 560 Broadway. 941-0012. Through July 30. . . . **ASHLEY BICKERTON,** Sonnabend, 420 West Broadway. 966-6160. Through June 26. . . . **TEUN HOCKS** and **MIGUEL BRANCO,** P.P.O.W, 476 Broome St. 941-8642. Both shows through July 2. . . .

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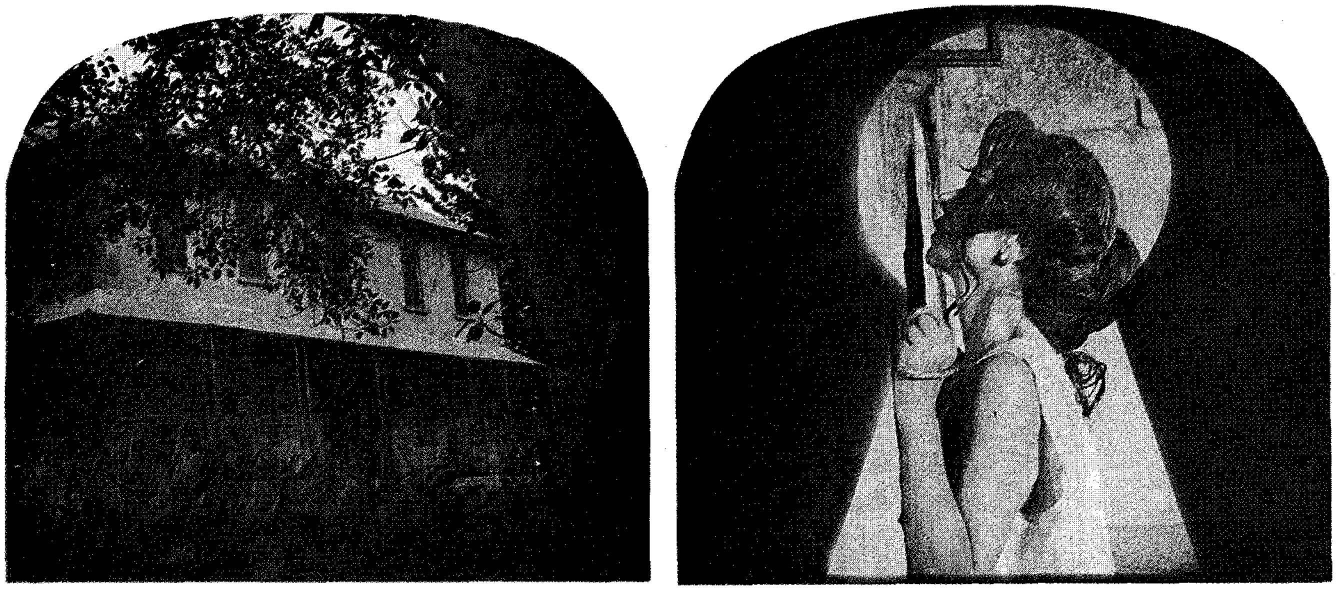
PATRICK IRELAND, Cowles, 420 West Broadway. 925-3500. Through July 2. . . . **GEORGE MACIUNAS,** Inglett, 100 Wooster St. 343-0573. Through June 26. . . . **GUY OVERFELT,** Keenan, 3 Crosby St. 431-5083. Through June 26. . . . **SKY PAPE,** June Kelly, 591 Broadway. 226-1660. Through June 30. . . . **KENNY SCHACHTER** and **JOHN CORBIN,** Gering, 476 Broome St. 226-8195. Both shows through July 2. . . . **MICHAEL ZWACK,** Kasmin, 74 Grand St. 219-3219. Through July 9.

AUCTIONS AND ANTIQUES

SOTHEBY'S—June 16: A single-owner sale of paperweights. . . . ¶ June 17: Americana, including furniture, decorative pieces, and silver. . . . ¶ June 18: An arcade sale of moderately priced decorative art. . . . ¶ June 22: Fine books, manuscripts, ephemera, and autographs, including fourteen much discussed letters written by J. D. Salinger to Joyce Maynard. . . . ¶ June 23: Garden statuary. . . . ¶ June 24: Nineteenth-century furniture, ceramics, carpets, and decorative art. . . . ¶ June 25-26: Coins, medals, and banknotes. . . . ¶ June 28: Comic books and comic art. . . . ¶ June 29: The sale of a single-owner collection of science-fiction memorabilia. (York Ave. at 72nd St. 606-7000.)

CHRISTIE'S—June 16: American furniture, silver, folk art, and decorative pieces. . . . ¶ June 23: A single-owner sale of Hebrew books and manuscripts from the Beth Din (rabbinical court) of the United Synagogue of London. . . . ¶ June 24: A benefit auction of a hundred guitars owned by Eric Clapton. (20 Rockefeller Plaza, at 49th St. 636-2000.)



"Laudanum #8" (1998), by Tracey Moffatt, at the Paul Morris gallery.

PHOTOGRAPHY

TRACEY MOFFATT—"Laudanum," a loosely narrative series of nineteen photogravures that tells the erotic and drug-laced story of two Victorian women. Through June 25. (Paul Morris, 465 W. 23rd St. 727-2753.)

"DOWN FROM UP"—Classic and contemporary images made from an elevated vantage point, by such artists as Alvin Langdon Coburn, Diane Cook, Mario Giacomelli, Emmet Gowin, Len Jenshel, and Laszlo Moholy-Nagy. Through July 9. (Alan Klotz/Photocollect, 22 E. 72nd St. 327-2211. Closed Tuesdays.)

"PURE PRODUCTS OF AMERICA"—A three-artist group show of black-and-white photographs of suburban life by Robert Adams, Bill Owens, and Henry Wessel. Through July 16. (Marks, 523 W. 24th St. 243-0200.)

INTERNATIONAL CENTER OF PHOTOGRAPHY—"Sea Change: The Seascape in Contemporary Photography" includes works by Robert Adams, Lynn Davis, Roni Horn, Stuart Klipper, and Randy West. Through Sept. 26. . . . ¶ "Myths, Dreams, and Realities in Contemporary Argentine Photography." Through Sept. 26. (1130 Fifth Ave., at 94th St. 860-1777. Open Tuesdays through Thursdays, 10 to 5; Fridays, 10 to 8; Saturdays and Sundays, 10 to 6.)

GROUP SHOW—Works in which artifice is the subject, by Oliver Boberg, Thom Lussier, Michael O'Brien, John Schabel, and Bing Wright. Through July 30. (Dee, 118 Mercer St. 965-8884.)

SHORT LIST—**MERRY ALPERN,** Benrubi, 52 E. 76th St. 517-3766. Through July 1. Also at Scalo, 560 Broadway. 334-9393. Through Aug. 7. . . . **SASHA BEZZUBOV** and **AUGUST SANDER,** Mann, 210 Eleventh Ave., at 25th St. 989-7600. Both shows through July 2. . . . **BILL CLAXTON,** Staley-Wise, 560 Broadway. 966-6223. Through July 16. . . . **GIANNI BERENGO GARDIN,** Leica, 670 Broadway. 777-3051. Opens Saturdays at noon; through June 19. . . . **FRANK GOHLKE** and **STUART KLIPPER,** Dorsky, 379 West Broadway. 966-6170. Through June 26. . . . **SKEET MC AULEY,** Feigen, 535 W. 20th St. 929-0500. Through July 30. . . . **RAY K. METZKER,** Laurence Miller, 20 W. 57th St. 397-3930. Through Aug. 13. . . . **ANDREA MODICA,** Houk, 745 Fifth Ave., at 57th St. 750-7070. Through June 26. . . . **TINA MODOTTI AND EDWARD WESTON,** Throckmorton, 153 E. 61st St. 223-1059. Through July 17. . . . **WILLIAM MORTENSEN,** Ricco/Maresca, 529 W. 20th St. 627-4819. Through June 26. . . . **ARNOLD NEWMAN,** Greenberg, 120 Wooster St. 334-0010. Through June 19. . . . **HELMUT NEWTON,** Scalo, 560 Broadway. 334-9393. Through Aug. 7. . . . **JOHN O'REILLY,** Saul, 560 Broadway. 431-0747. Through July 2. . . . **FLIP SCHULKE** and **JOEL MEYEROWITZ,** Danziger, 851 Madison Ave., at 70th St. 734-5300. Both shows through June 25. . . . **CINDY SHERMAN,** Metro Pictures, 519 W. 24th St. 206-7100. Through June 26. . . . **MAGGIE STEBER,** Camera Club of New York, 853 Broadway, at 14th St. 260-7077. Open weekdays, 1 to 5; through July 2. . . . **METTE TRONVOLL,** Murray Guy, 453 W. 17th St. 463-7372. Through June 26. . . . **SUSAN UNTERBERG,** Richardson, 560 Broadway. 343-1255. Through July 2. . . . **PAUL WOLFF,** Gallery 292, at 120 Wooster St. 431-0292. Through June 19. . . . **FRANCESCA WOODMAN,** Marian Goodman, 24 W. 57th St. 977-7160. Open Mondays; through Aug. 31.

(See the museum listings for photography exhibitions at the Brooklyn Museum of Art and the American Museum of Natural History.)

CLASSICAL MUSIC

OPERA

METROPOLITAN OPERA—Free concert performances in the parks of New York City and New Jersey. **LA BOHÈME,** with Mary Mills, Gwynne Geyer, Marcello Giordani, and Motti Kaston; conducted by Marco Armiliato. (Marine Park, Brooklyn. June 16.) . . . With Hei-Kyung Hong, Ainhoa Arteta, Mr. Giordani, and Earle Patriarco: Mr. Armiliato. (Waterloo Village, Stanhope, N.J. June 19.) . . . With Ms. Hong, Ms. Geyer, Alfredo Portilla, and Mr. Patriarco; Mr. Armiliato. (Brookdale Park, Montclair, N.J. June 23.) . . . With Ms. Hong, Ms. Arteta, Mr. Portilla, and Mr. Patriarco; Mr. Armiliato. (Cooper River Park, Pennsauken, N.J. June 26.) . . . ¶ **LUCIA DI LAMMERMOOR,** with Youngok Shin, Stuart Neill, Haijing Fu, and Paul Plishka; Gareth Morrell. (Brookdale Park, Montclair, N.J. June 18.) . . . With Annick Massis, Jonathan Welch, Kim Josephson, and Hao Jiang Tian; Mr. Morrell. (Miller Field, Gateway National Recreation Area, Staten Island. June 22. . . . Buccleuch Park, New Brunswick, N.J. June 25.) (Evenings at 8. No tickets necessary. In case of questionable weather, call 212-362-6000.)

LITTLE ORCHESTRA SOCIETY—Vivaldi's opera "L'Olimpiade," composed for the Venetian Carnival of 1734, receives its first complete American performance. Dino Anagnost conducts. (Alice Tully Hall. 875-5050. June 16 at 7:30.)

AMATO OPERA COMPANY—Final performances of "The Merry Widow," in English. (Amato Opera Theatre, 319 Bowery, at 2nd St. 228-8200. June 19 at 7 and June 20 at 2:30.)

L'OPÉRA FRANÇAIS DE NEW YORK—Yves Abel conducts a staged performance of "La Grande Duchesse de Gérolstein," Offenbach's 1867 satire on the international political aspirations of aristocrats at minor courts; with mezzo-soprano Stephanie Blythe in the title role, heading a cast that also includes soprano Anne Saint-Denis, tenors Richard Troxell and William Saetre, and bass-baritone Gérard Edery. (Kaye Playhouse, Hunter College, Park Ave. at 68th St. 772-4448. June 22 and June 24 at 8.)

ORCHESTRAS AND CHORUSES

NEW YORK PHILHARMONIC—The orchestra's subscription season comes to an end as Kurt Masur conducts Prokofiev's "Classical" Symphony, Strauss's Violin Concerto (featuring Sarah Chang), and Beethoven's Symphony No. 7. (Avery Fisher Hall. 875-5030. June 16-17 at 8 and June 18 at 2.)

AMERICAN EXPRESS

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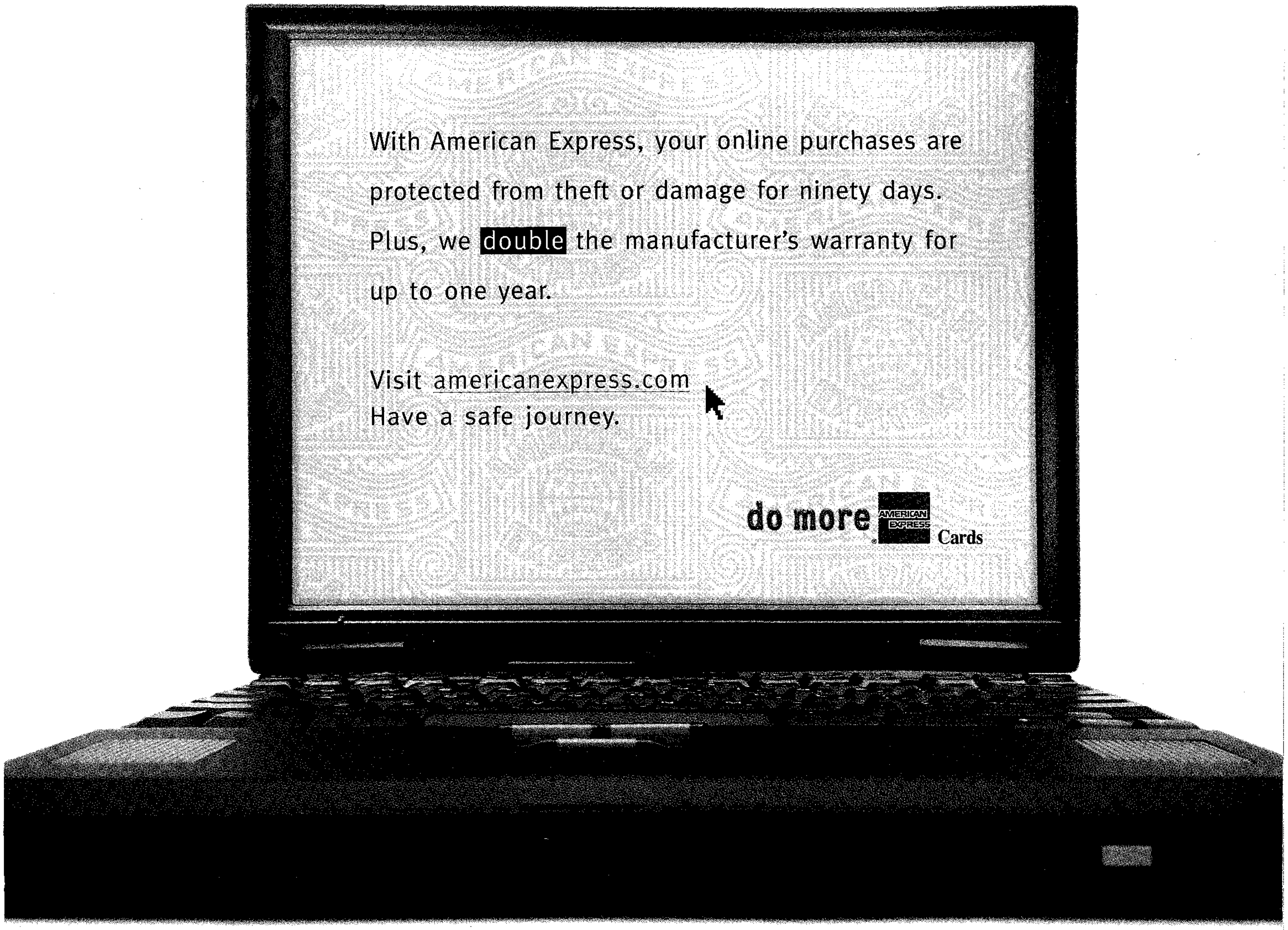

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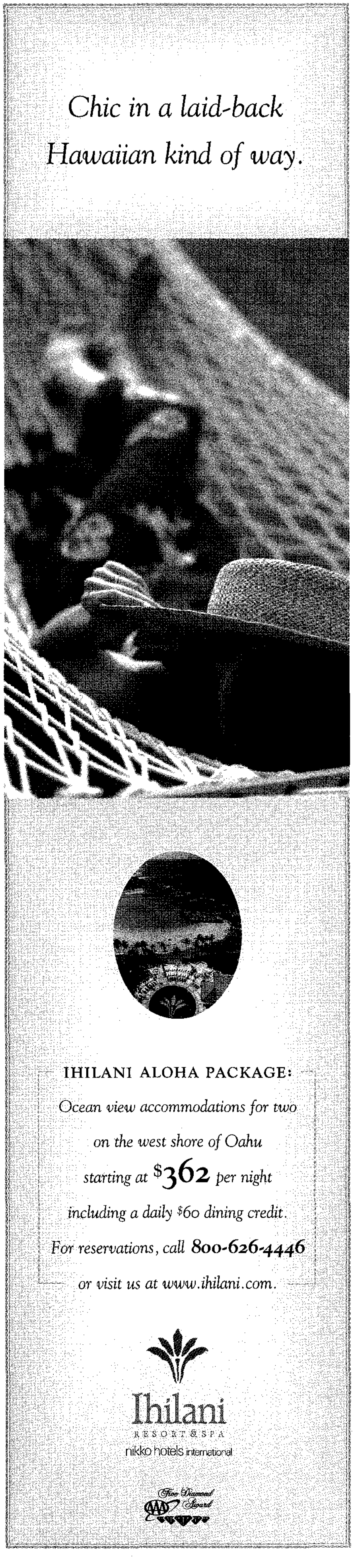
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Five Diamond Award

New York City Gay Men's Chorus—Barry Oliver directs a program that includes David Conte's "Dance" (to a text by Whitman) and "Elegy for Matthew" (eulogizing the late Matthew Shepard). The women's a-cappella group Sound Circle also offers several selections. (Carnegie Hall. 247-7800. June 17 at 8.)

American Russian Young Artists Orchestra—The hands-across-the-sea initiative was founded in 1987 as the American Soviet Youth Orchestra and has grown into a year-round cultural exchange and community outreach organization. In this concert, Leon Botstein and Dmitri Liss share the conducting duties, leading Szymanowski's Violin Concerto No. 2 (with the thirteen-year-old Siberian violinist Mikhail Simonyan), Ellington's "Night Creature," Stravinsky's "Firebird" Suite (1945), and the première of a fanfare by Nico Muhly. (Alice Tully Hall. June 22 at 8. 875-5050. A benefit concert.)

Orchestra of the S.E.M. Ensemble—Petr Kotick conducts this intrepid group in new works by Wadada Leo Smith, Akemi Naito, James Fei, Virgil Moorfield, and Keith Moore. (Willow Place Auditorium, 26 Willow Pl., Brooklyn. June 25 at 8. For information about tickets, call 718-488-7659.)

New York Chamber Symphony—Robert Mann conducts C. P. E. Bach's C-Major Symphony, Mozart's A-Major Violin Concerto (with Axel Strauss), and Haydn's Symphony No. 86. (Central Park Band Shell, mid-Park at 72nd St. June 29 at 7:30. No tickets necessary. In case of questionable weather, call 262-6927.)

RECITALS

Bargemusic—June 17 at 7:30 and June 20 at 4: An all-Schubert concert that includes the "Trout" Quintet. . . . ¶ June 24 at 7:30: Piano quartets by Mahler, Schumann, and Dvořák. . . . ¶ June 25 at 7:30: Violinist Jennifer Frautschi, cellist Felix Fan, and pianist Paige Hoffman perform Mauricio Kagel's Piano Trio; violist Toby Hoffman rounds out the ensemble for Brahms's G-Minor Piano Quartet. . . . ¶ June 27 at 4: Mr. Nagy performs Bartók's "Dance Suite," Messiaen's "Le Baiser de l'Enfant Jésus," and Schubert's Piano Sonata in B-Flat Major (D. 960). (Fulton Ferry Landing, Brooklyn. 718-624-4061.)

Guitar Among Others—Guitarist Winslow Browning is spotlighted in chamber works by Claude Bolling, Radamés Gnattali, and Gerald Schwertberger. (St. Luke In-the-Fields, 487 Hudson St., at Grove St. June 17 at 8. Tickets at the door.)

Hotel Sounds—Violinists currently reign in the way-uptown music cottage of Le Refuge Inn and the second-floor music room of the Hotel Wales. June 20 at noon (at Le Refuge) and at 6 and 8 (at the Wales): Lara St. John, with pianist Ilan Rechtman, performs works by Tchaikovsky, Saint-Saëns, and others; cellist Iris Regev assists in several of Mr. Rechtman's "Jazzicals." . . . ¶ June 27 at noon (at Le Refuge) and at 6 and 8 (at the Wales): Asmira Woodward-Page and Mr. Rechtman offer music by Mozart, Ysaÿe, and Ravel. (Le Refuge Inn, 620 City Island Ave., City Island, the Bronx. 718-885-2478. . . . Hotel Wales, Madison Ave. at 92nd St. No tickets necessary.)

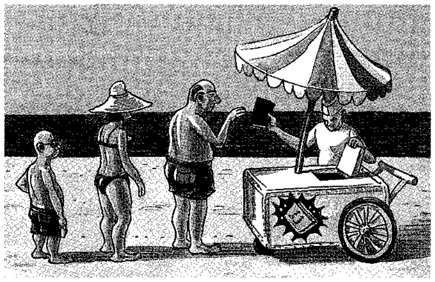
Music by Dinos Constantinides—Chamber pieces by this Greek-American composer, performed by members of the Louisiana Sinfonietta. (Weill Recital Hall. 247-7800. June 21 at 8.)

Lionheart—The men's a-cappella vocal group offers music and poetry by the French Ars Nova master Guillaume de Machaut. (Medieval Court, Metropolitan Museum, Fifth Ave. at 83rd St. 570-3949. June 22 at 6.)

New Amsterdam Brass—The brass ensemble offers music by Giovanni Gabrieli and Bach, among other Renaissance and Baroque masters. (Central Park Band Shell, mid-Park at 72nd St. June 22 at 7:30. No tickets necessary. In case of questionable weather, call 262-6927.)

BOOK CURRENTS

Tight Spots



It's that time of year again, when publishers release their fastest page-turners. This summer's escapist fare for beach and back-yard reading features an array of big-name tinglers. Here are some samplings of their prose (with authors' identities below):

"Come on, damn you." From somewhere inside her there came a deep swell of emotion. Some of it was the loss of her father. Some of it was fear of this terrible man. Some of it was anger, finally not with herself, but with her no-good husband. But most of it was an emotion that had no name, something ancient and primal, the feeling that a tiny animal might have when, after being pursued to the end of its endurance, it turns and bares its teeth.

•

She drew her tongue back and sucked with her lips again. My entire face was tingling. All my limbs were struggling both against her and to touch her, yes, embrace her yet fight her. She lay against the very evidence of my desire.

•

"Drop it!" Lucky commanded. "Who, *me*?" Duke said, up for the challenge. "Yes, you." "Sorry. No can do." She took a long, deep breath. Dealing with homicidal maniacs was never her favorite way to spend a day. "Do it!" she said. "Or I'll blow your dumb brains all over this goddamn room." He turned his gun toward Lennie. "If you're fast enough," he said, his finger tightening on the trigger.

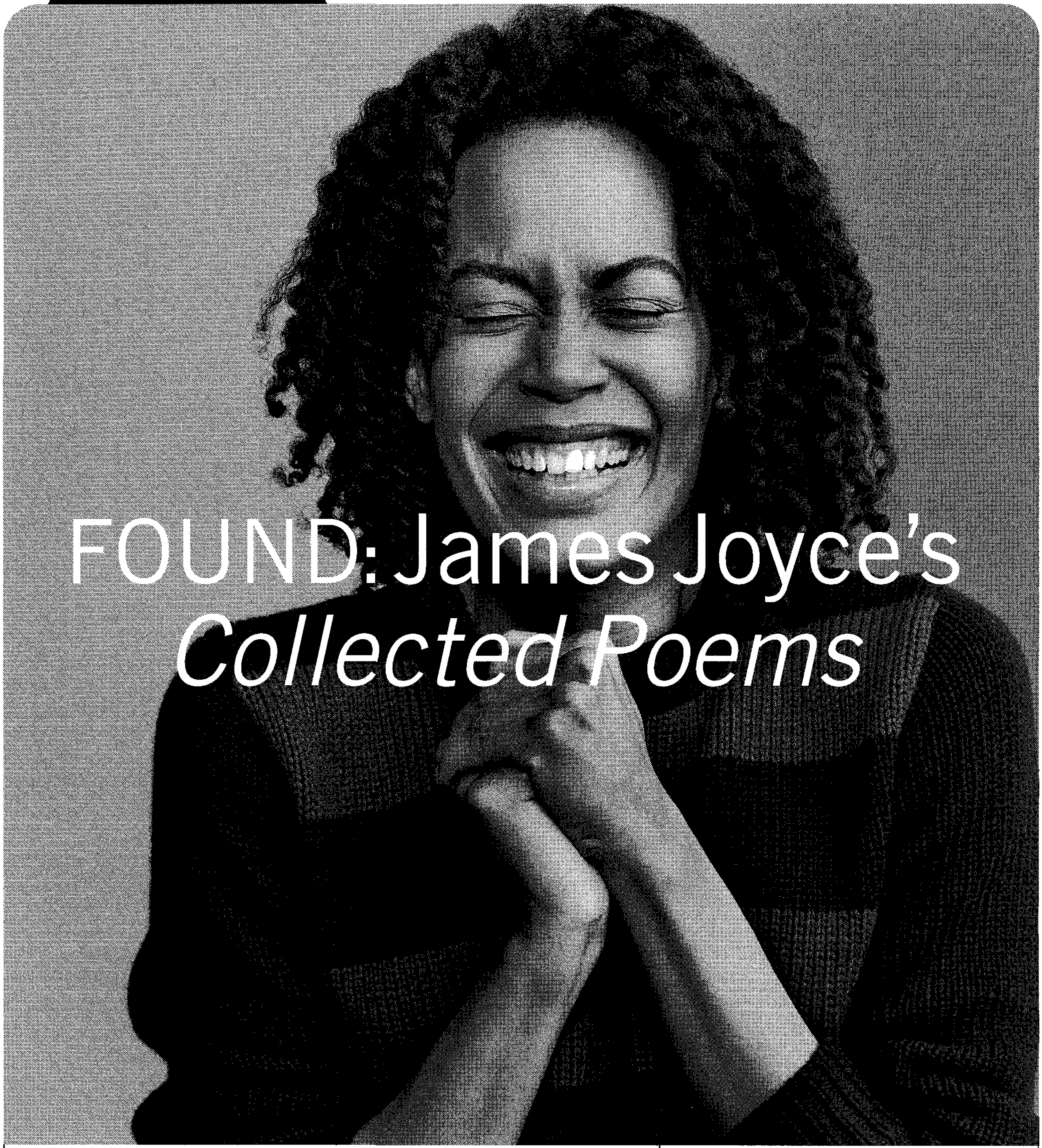
•

As he spoke the dart from Tommaso's rifle flew, a silver streak under the floodlights, and quivered in the center of Starling's back. She spun, instantly dizzy, vision going dark, trying to spot a target, saw the barrel at the edge of the loft and fired, fired, fired, fired. Tommaso rolling back from the edge, splinters stinging him, blue gun smoke rolling up into the lights. She fired once more as her vision failed, reached behind her hip for a magazine even as her knees gave way.

1. Louis L'Amour, from "By the Waters of San Tadeo," in "Beyond the Great Snow Mountains" (Bantam).
2. Anne Rice, "Vittorio, the Vampire" (Knopf).
3. Jackie Collins, "Dangerous Kiss" (Simon & Schuster).
4. Thomas Harris, "Hannibal" (Delacorte).

DOUG ALLEN

Out-of-Print Books


FOUND: James Joyce's
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Bachmann-Klibonoff-Fridman Trio—The group performs Ravel's Piano Trio and several pieces by Gershwin. (Morgan Library, 29 E. 36th St. 685-0008, ext. 347. June 24 at 6.)

Duo Vivace—The piano duo of Eleonor Bindman-Auer and Susan Sobolewski performs Barber's "Interlude I" and "Souvenirs," Schubert's F-Minor Fantasie and "Valse-Caprice No. 6" (the latter in Ms. Bindman-Auer's adaptation of Liszt's transcription), and arrangements of works by Bernstein and Gershwin. (Weill Recital Hall. 247-7800. June 24 at 8.)

"Outer Voices"—This mini-festival of vocal music was not created with bel-canto aficionados in mind. Instead, it delves into the vocal innovations of the avant garde, spotlighting a versatile lot of singers who have probably driven their voice teachers to distraction. June 25: Traditional vocal music from Japan and India, plus works based on Asian vocal techniques, by Alice Shields, Harry Partch, Toby Twining, and Renée Favand. . . . ¶ June 26: Cutting-edge cabaret songs by Francis Thorne, Denman Maroney, Lisa Karrer, and others, with Thomas Bogdan and Tony Boutté among the performers. . . . ¶ June 27: In its début performance, Siren (a vocal quartet comprising sopranos Anna Dembska and Dora Ohrenstein, mezzo-soprano Karen Goldfeder, and contralto Pamela Warrick Smith) performs Stravinsky's "Russian Peasant Songs," Virgil Thomson's "Medea of Euripides," French medieval selections, and recent works by Ms. Dembska and Zae Munn. (HERE, 145 Sixth Ave., near Spring St. 647-0202. Evenings at 8.)

OUT OF TOWN

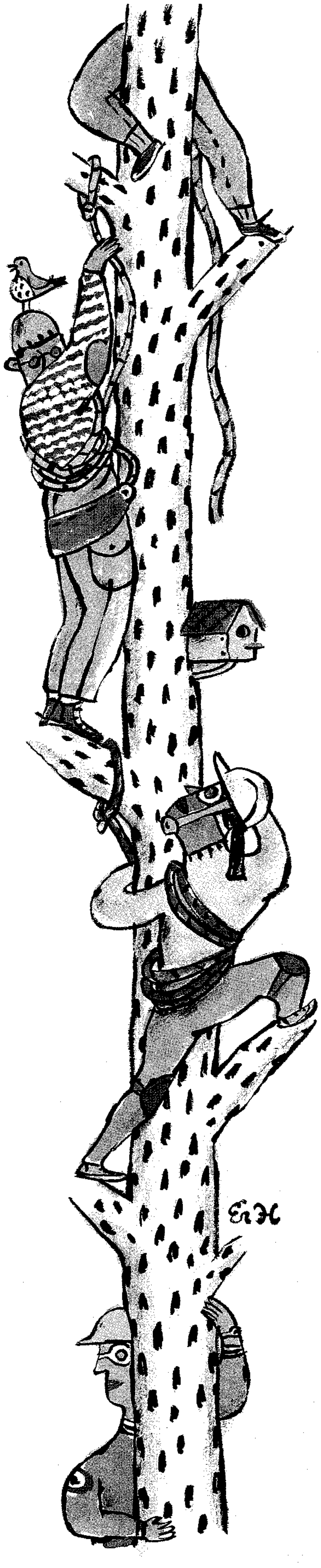
(A selective listing of festival events within a reasonable drive from New York City. Call the presenters for complete schedules.)

Tanglewood—Opening concerts of the season, which continues through Labor Day weekend. June 18-19 at 7: The Boston Early Music Festival's production of Cavalli's "Ercole Amante," fully staged. . . . ¶ June 20 at 2:30: Music by Alessandro Scarlatti, performed by the King's Noyse, the Boston Early Music Festival Violin Band, and several singers. . . . ¶ June 25 at 8:30: Sonatas by Mozart and Enescu are among the works performed by violinist Kyung-Wha Chung and pianist Itamar Golan. . . . ¶ June 26 at 8:30: The Juilliard String Quartet plays quartets by Mendelssohn (his Second), Shostakovich (his Third), and Ravel. . . . ¶ June 27 at 2:30: The Juilliard foursome offers quartets by Beethoven (his First) and Smetana (his First, "From My Life"), as well as Shostakovich's Piano Quintet (with Yefim Bronfman assisting). (Lenox, Mass. 413-637-5165.)

Caramoor—Opening performances of the season, which continues through Aug. 14. June 19 at 7: Peter Oundjian leads the Orchestra of St. Luke's in a new work by Bruce Adolphe, Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 5 (with André Watts), and Mendelssohn's "Italian" Symphony. . . . ¶ June 20 at 4:30: Soprano Marguerite Krull, mezzo-soprano Vivica Genaux, and pianist Garrick Ohlsson offer vocal works and piano solos by Donizetti, Rossini, Chopin, and others. . . . ¶ June 25 at 8: A vocal quartet offers a recital that includes Schumann's "Spanische Liebeslieder." . . . ¶ June 26 at 8:30: Andrew Parrott conducts the Orchestra of St. Luke's in Gounod's "Petite Symphonie," Mendelssohn's E-Minor Violin Concerto (with Elmar Oliveira), and Beethoven's Second Symphony. . . . ¶ June 27 at 4:30: Beethoven's C-Minor String Trio, Mendelssohn's D-Major String Quartet, and Schubert's C-Major String Quintet. (Katonah, N.Y. 914-232-1252.)

Opera Festival of New Jersey—Opening performances of the season, which continues through July 18. June 19 and June 25 at 8 and June 27 at 2: "Don Giovanni." . . . ¶ June 26 at 8: "Madama Butterfly." (McCarter Theatre, 91 University Pl., Princeton, N.J. 609-683-8000.)

Music Mountain—June 20 at 3: The Shanghai String Quartet, with flutist Eugenia Zukerman, in works by Mozart, Ravel, and Beethoven. . . . ¶ June 27 at 2: Bert Lucarelli leads sixteen oboists in Handel's "Music for the Royal Fireworks." . . . ¶ June 27 at 3: Mr. Lucarelli and the Amernet String Quartet play works by Haydn, Brahms, and Mozart. (Falls Village, Conn. 860-824-7126. The season continues through Sept. 12.)



The Professional Tree Climbers' Jamboree, at the New York Botanical Garden.

ERIC HANSON

Maverick Concerts—The Tokyo String Quartet plays quartets by Beethoven (in D Major, Op. 18, No. 3), Schumann (in A Minor, Op. 41, No. 1), Webern (his "Langsamer Satz"), and Wolf (his "Italian Serenade"). (Woodstock, N.Y. 914-679-8217. June 27 at 3. The season continues through Sept. 5.)

ABOVE AND BEYOND

Social Climbing—The sweet-gum and white-oak trees of the New York Botanical Garden will be crawling with professional arborists on Saturday, June 19, from 10 to 4. There won't be any trimming of the branches, but there will be stiff competition during the Professional Tree Climbers' Jamboree. Judged by how fast they can scurry up a forty-foot rope and by their ability to rescue other climbers, the participants have to be careful not to lose their footing, or their composure: poise is an important criterion. The winners receive local bragging rights and the opportunity to take their harnesses and carabiners to the International Tree Climbers' Championship in Stamford, Connecticut, in August. "You're not doing any pruning," former competitor and head arborist at the Botanical Garden Mike Guarino says. "You're climbing for fun." (Bronx Park. 718-817-8700.)

Juneteenth—When Union troops arrived in Galveston, Texas, on June 19, 1865, two months after Lee surrendered, news of the end of slavery finally reached the twenty-eighth state. During the latter part of the nineteenth century, June 19 became a date for Southern African-Americans to celebrate their freedom. The practice fell out of favor during this century, but it's been revived in the past two decades (Texas declared the day a state holiday in 1980). The Brooklyn Historical Society observes the day with guided tours of its current exhibit "In Pursuit of Freedom: African Americans in Brooklyn and the Anti-Slavery Movement," a lecture about (and a tasting of) such popular African-American nineteenth-century dishes as corn bread, tea cakes, and clam fritters, and a walking tour of Underground Railroad-related sites in the neighborhood. (128 Pierrepont St., Brooklyn. 718-624-0890. June 19, from 12:30 to 3. **Note:** After this date, the society will be closed for renovations for at least a year.)

Readings—June 16 at 7: By poet Kay Ryan. (Three Lives & Company, 154 W. 10th St. No tickets necessary.) . . . ¶ June 24 at 7: The journal *Literal Latté* celebrates its fifth anniversary with novelists Stephen Dixon and Lynne Sharon Schwartz and essayist Phillip Lopate reading from their work. (National Arts Club, 15 Gramercy Park S. No tickets necessary.)

Talks—June 17 at 7: The artists Christo and Jeanne-Claude talk about the hundred and seventy-eight trees in Rehein, Switzerland, which they covered last fall with woven polyester, as well as their plans to construct eleven thousand fifteen-foot steel gates in Central Park which will be draped with saffron-colored nylon. (French Institute–Alliance Française, 22 E. 60th St. 355-6100.) . . . ¶ June 17 at 7:30: David Halberstam, editor of "The Best American Sports Writing of the Century," moderates a panel discussion in which writers Gay Talese, Ira Berkow, and George Plimpton talk about covering men who get paid to play games. (Barnes & Noble, 33 E. 17th St. No tickets necessary.) . . . ¶ June 22 at 8: Composer Philip Glass discusses using new technologies and working with others. (The Kitchen, 512 W. 19th St. 255-5793.)

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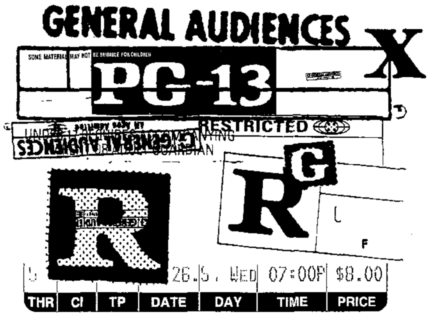

THE MOVIES

OPENING

An American Love Story—Jennifer Fox's nine-hour documentary (shown in three parts) about a thirty-year interracial marriage. Opening June 23. (Film Forum.)

And Baby Makes Two—A documentary about eight New York City women who decide to become single mothers. Directed by Judy Katz and Oren Rudavsky. Opening June 25. (Quad Cinema.)

Big Daddy—A single lawyer (Adam Sandler) adopts a five-year-old boy to impress his girlfriend. Directed by Dennis Dugan. Opening June 25.

The Day of the Beast—A comedy about a priest who goes in search of the Antichrist. Directed by Alex de la Iglesia. In Spanish. Opening June 18. (Cinema Village.)

The General's Daughter—A crime thriller, with John Travolta, Madeleine Stowe, James Cromwell, and Timothy Hutton. Directed by Simon West. Opening June 18.

An Ideal Husband—A romantic comedy, based on Oscar Wilde's play, about a womanizer trying to help a friend. With Cate Blanchett, Minnie Driver, Rupert Everett, Julianne Moore, and Jeremy Northam. Directed by Oliver Parker. Opening June 18.

My Son the Fanatic—A love story about a Pakistani taxi driver and an English prostitute. Directed by Udayan Prasad. Opening June 25.

The Red Dwarf—Yvan LeMoine's tale of a man looking for love. In French. Opening June 18. (Cinema Village and Lincoln Plaza Cinema.)

Regret to Inform—Barbara Sonneborn's documentary about American and Vietnamese war widows. Opening June 25. (Art Greenwich Twin.)

Run Lola Run—The story of a girl (Franka Potente) who must get money quickly to save her boyfriend's life. Written and directed by Tom Tykwer. In German. Opening June 18. (Angelika Film Center, Chelsea Cinemas, Eastside Playhouse, and Lincoln Plaza Cinemas.)

Sitcom—A farce about a family and their pet rat. Directed by François Ozon. In French. Opening June 18. (Quad Cinema.)

Tarzan—Disney's animated film with music based on the Edgar Rice Burroughs adventure story. Directed by Chris Buck and Kevin Lima. Opening June 18. (Guild.)

When Love Comes—The romantic adventures of six New Zealand teen-agers. Directed by Garth Maxwell. Opening June 25. (Quad Cinema.)

FILM NOTES

(If a movie has been reviewed recently in The Current Cinema, the date of its review is given.)

Austin Powers: The Spy Who Shagged Me—The sequel to Mike Myers's aboveground cult classic "Austin Powers: International Man of Mystery" begins promisingly, as Austin plays erotic chess with a model called Ivana Humpalot, and Dr. Evil creates a malignant midget version of himself called Mini-Me who attends all his meetings and intimidates the other members of the staff. But then Austin loses his mojo and has to return to the swinging sixties in London to retrieve it, and the movie resorts to candy-colored mod sets, more and more fetid gross-out humor, and general repetitiveness and feebleness. As Dr. Evil, Myers gives himself fewer of those archly overexplicit explanations of his wicked plans—the weirdly literate jargon that sent millions of teens into paroxysms of joy the last time around. With the elongated, twinkling blonde Heather Graham as the spy Felicity Shagwell, and many, many other people trying to be funny. Written by Myers and Michael McCullers; directed by Jay Roach.—*David Denby* (Cinema I, Cinema II, Criterion Center, Kips Bay Theatre, Lincoln Square, Metro Cinema, 19th Street East 6, Orpheum VII, and Village Theatre VII.)

Besieged—An art film in the bad sense of the term. In an old Roman house, an eccentric English pianist (David Thewlis) and his beautiful housekeeper (Thandie Newton), a refugee from an African dictatorship, circle around one another in a series of frustrated and (for the viewer) frustrating semi-encounters. The director, Bernardo Bertolucci, who wrote the screenplay with Clare Peploe, shies away from the intensity that we want and need in this chamber drama by using a variety of trick editing processes that slow or interrupt the action; the characters not only elude each other, they elude us, too. Only the handsome cinematography and the music that the pianist plays—passages of Bach, Beethoven, and Grieg—make a direct, unaffected appeal to our senses and emotions.—*D.D.* (Angelika Film Center and Paris.)

Buena Vista Social Club—In 1996, the blues guitarist Ry Cooder gathered together some wonderful Cuban musicians in their seventies and eighties for a successful recording project. Two years later, Cooder went back to Cuba, this time accompanied by cameras and the German director Wim Wenders, seeking out the men and women of Cuban music on the streets and in the old dance halls of Havana. In this beautiful city that got left behind by the global economy, the bedraggled stone buildings and pre-revolutionary Chevys and Dodges have aged into pure soulfulness. So have the musicians, who still look great, play beautifully, and exude a stirring seriousness and dignity. The movie comes closer to pure happiness than anything else in the theatres at the moment, and it has an intriguing and moving subtext: the Cubans' buried but irrepressible love of things American.—*D.D.* (Angelika Film Center and Lincoln Plaza Cinemas.)

John Travolta in "The General's Daughter."

STEPHEN SAVAGE

The Eagle (1925)—About as entertaining as a swashbuckler can be without a real swashbuckler at the center of it. Rudolph Valentino plays the Black Eagle—Zorro transposed to the Russian steppes. He doesn't commit much derring-do, but Valentino soars through the comic-romantic reversals of the plot, in which the Eagle poses as a French tutor to the daughter of his arch-enemy, the sadistic landowner Kyrilla (James Marcus). Vilma Banky makes a fetching love interest, and Louise Dresser wins laughs as an oversexed czarina; the real star is art director William Cameron Menzies, whose fairy-tale Russia is all cupolas and gables and doorways and windows. Clarence Brown directed; Hans Kraly adapted Pushkin's story "Dubrowsky." Silent.—*Michael Sragow* (American Museum of the Moving Image; June 27.)

The Earrings of Madame de . . . (1953)—Perfection. This tragedy of love, which begins in narcissistic flirtation and passes from romance to passion to desperation, is set, ironically, in aristocratic circles that seem too superficial to take love tragically. The very beauty of Max Ophuls's film is sometimes used against it: the gliding, sensuous camerawork, the extraordinary romantic atmosphere, the gowns, the balls, the chandeliers, the nuances of language, and the sense of honor are regarded as evidence of lack of substance. But Ophuls loved Mozart and Stendhal, and he also calls up a third master: the opera sequence that gives the film its musical theme is Gluck's "Orfeo." The performances by Danielle Darrieux as Madame de, by Charles Boyer as her husband, Monsieur de, a general, and by Vittorio De Sica as her lover, the Baron, are quite likely the finest each actor ever gave. In French.—*Pauline Kael* (Walter Reade Theatre; June 25-27.)

Entrapment—Jon Amiel's slack and predictable caper, with Sean Connery as a master thief and the gorgeous Catherine Zeta-Jones as an insurance investigator out to bring him down. The stars lack any sort of chemistry, which is too bad, since the script, by the always unreliable Ron Bass (with William Broyles), is intended as a romantic cat-and-mouse fantasy.—*Bruce Diones* (Chelsea West, Criterion Center, Murray Hill Cinemas, Park & 86th Street Cinemas, 62nd & Broadway, 64th and 2nd, and Village East Cinemas.)

The Green Room (1978)—François Truffaut's inert period piece about a widowed journalist (played by Truffaut himself) who turns his wife's bedchamber into a memorial room and a decrepit chapel into a shrine for the friends he lost in the First World War. The script (by Truffaut and Jean Gruault) borrows chunks of Henry James's "The Altar of the Dead" (and a bit of "The Beast in the Jungle"). But it doesn't dig deep enough into the submerged emotions of the morbid antihero to show the intellectual vitality that should streak through his depression. All we get is a dreary talkfest. In French.—*M.S.* (Film Forum 2; June 22.)

Instinct—Anthony Hopkins plays a distinguished anthropologist who lives happily amid the mountain gorillas of Rwanda but goes ape when some rogue park rangers try to eliminate the peaceful furry beasts. Several years later, he's stuck in a ward for the criminally insane in a Florida prison, and Cuba Gooding, Jr., a hot-shot young psychiatrist, tries to spring him. It seems that the

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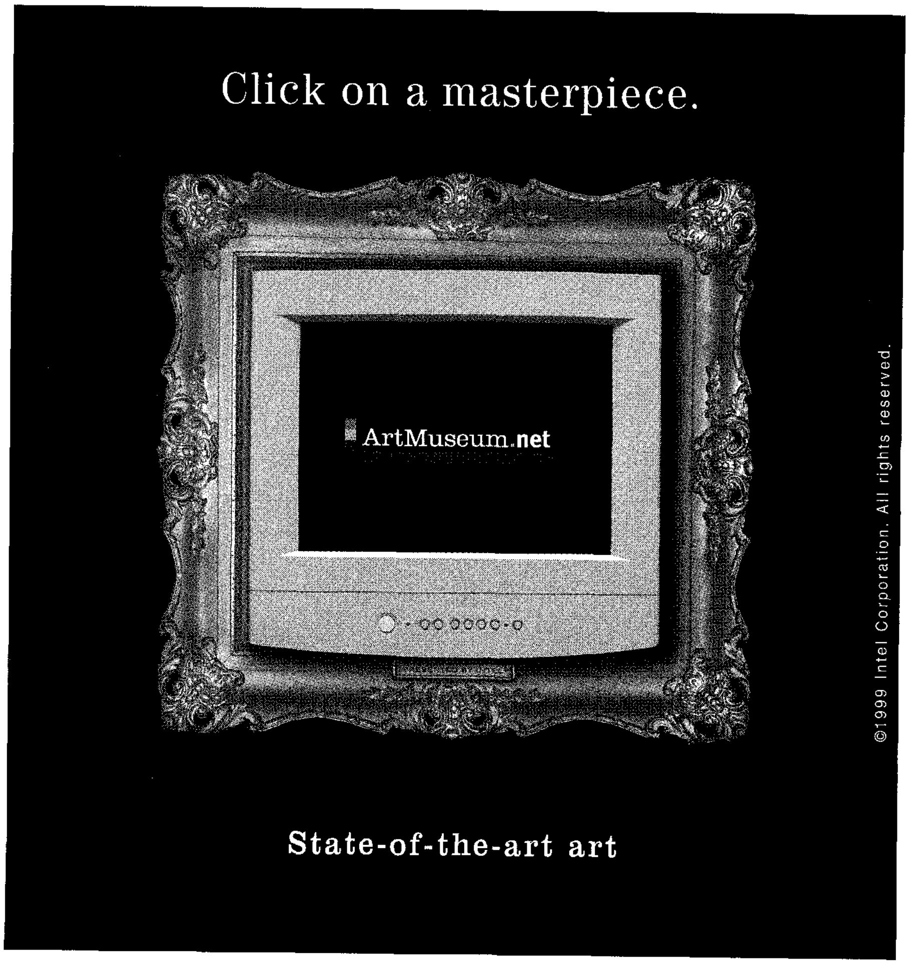
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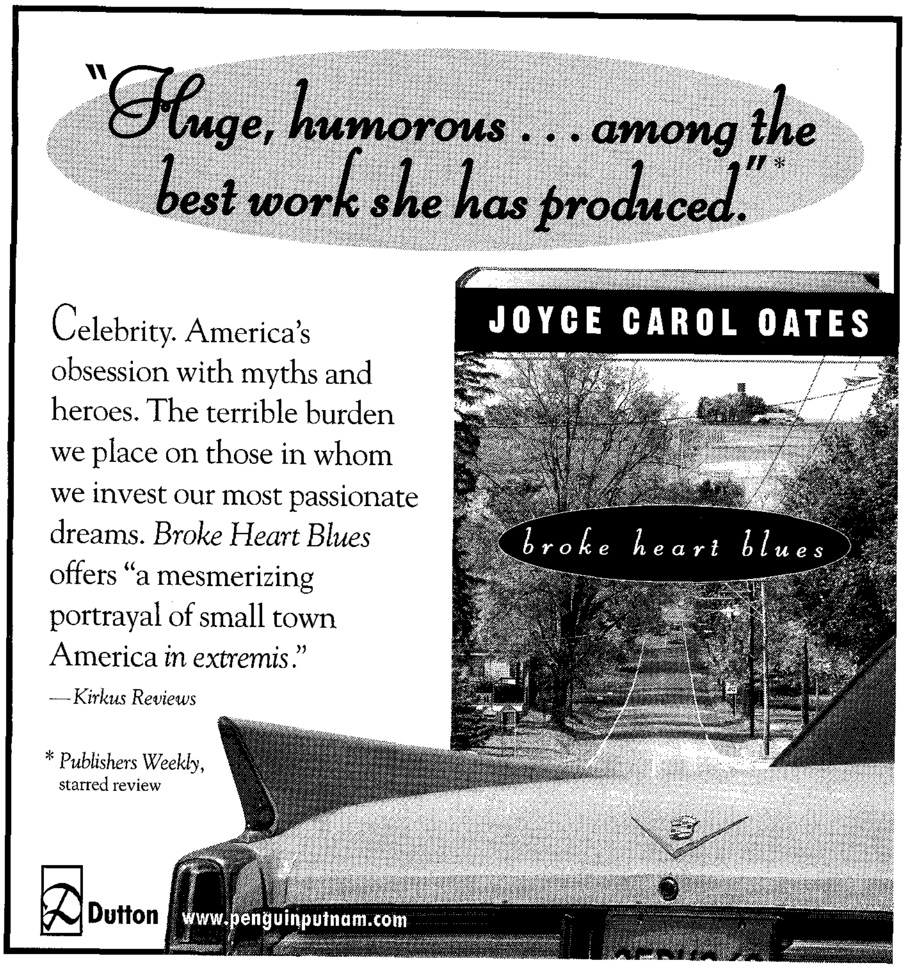
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anthropologist, despite his violent habits, is a deeply moral man with a Rousseauian take on the corruptions of civilization and the benevolence of life in a state of nature. This unfortunate rubbish, written by Gerald DiPego (from a novel by Daniel Quinn) and directed by Jon Turteltaub, preaches against violence while attempting to excite us with the peculiar spectacle of Hopkins bashing people twice his size. The only pleasurable element in it is the performance of Gooding, whose charm and intelligence, products of high civilization, neatly undermine everything the filmmakers are trying to say.—*D.D.* (6/14/99) (Art Greenwich Twin, Chelsea Cinemas, East 86th Street Cinemas, 84th Street Sixplex, Murray Hill Cinemas, State, Sutton, and Union Square.)

LETTER FROM AN UNKNOWN WOMAN (1948)—Max Ophuls made this film in Hollywood, but its romantic evocation of late-nineteenth-century Vienna is as stylized and as beautifully textured as his European work. His theme (as it was almost always) is different approaches to love. A pianist, Louis Jourdan, seduces the impressionable adolescent Joan Fontaine and promptly forgets her; years later he meets her again, and, thinking her a fresh conquest, seduces her again. But in the intervening years she has borne him a child and remained hopelessly in love with him. Fontaine suffers and suffers, but so *exquisitely* that one doesn't know whether to clobber the poor, wronged creature or to give in and weep.—*P.K.* (Walter Reade Theatre; June 25-27.)

LIMBO—John Sayles's latest, and was there ever a case of so much turning into so little? In Alaska, a gutsy road-tavern singer (Mary Elizabeth Mastrantonio) and a stoic former fisherman with a dark secret (David Strathairn) get together and take off in a boat, accompanied by the singer's resentful teen-age daughter (Vanessa Martinez). Through no fault of their own, the trio get stranded on a deserted, rainy island way up north with nothing to do but wait for the cold and listen to Martinez read from a child's diary that she discovers in an abandoned cabin. Mastrantonio is wonderful—if properly framed and supported, her performance might have been a classic. But Sayles can't seem to pull the elements of narrative filmmaking together. He sets up all sorts of tensions—tourism versus native industry, the pride of loneliness versus the pull of family—and abandons them, leaving the audience in a frostbitten mood. The impressively bleak cinematography is by Haskell Wexler.—*D.D.* (Angelika Film Center and Lincoln Square.)

THE LOSS OF SEXUAL INNOCENCE—The new Mike Figgis film marks one of his irregular forays into dreamy experiment. In a loose way, it tells the story of Nic; we see him as a young boy in Africa, as an older boy back in England, as a sexually thwarted teen-ager (played by Jonathan Rhys-Meyers), and then as an adult (Julian Sands) who leaves his family and travels back to the desert. These episodes are spliced with the story of Adam and Eve: a black man and a white woman rise naked from a lake and take it from there. There is much that is infuriating and pretentious here, but you can forgive Figgis almost anything, because his ambition allows him to stumble upon sights that no other director could envisage; there is one section, entitled "Twins," that is the most haunting thing he has ever done. Two adult sisters who were separated at birth (both played wonderfully by Saffron Burrows) pass each other at an airport. The heartache of their near-miss needs a whole movie to itself.—*Anthony Lane* (Angelika Film Center and First & 62nd Cinemas.)

THE MUMMY—In the nineteen-twenties, in a fabled city in the sands of Egypt, in a hidden tomb, a beefy American adventurer named O'Connell (Brendan Fraser) goes looking for buried treasure. With him are a studious but sultry librarian (Rachel Weisz) and her dim but cowardly brother (John Hannah). We already know that

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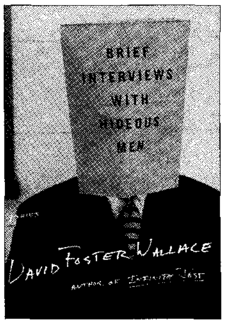
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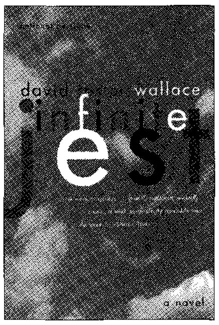
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infinite jest
a novel

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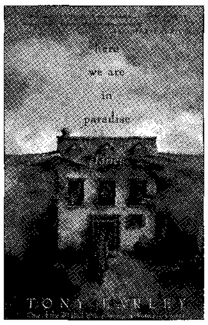
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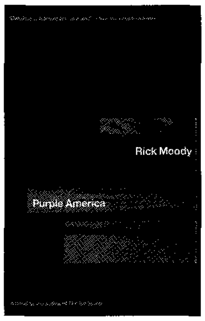
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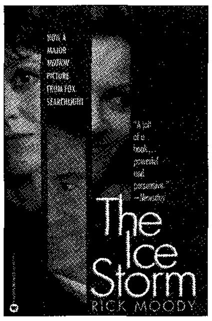
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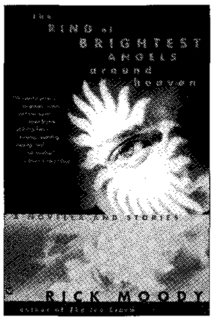
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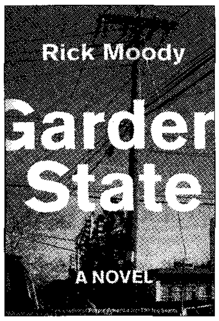
Rick Moody
Garden State
A NOVEL

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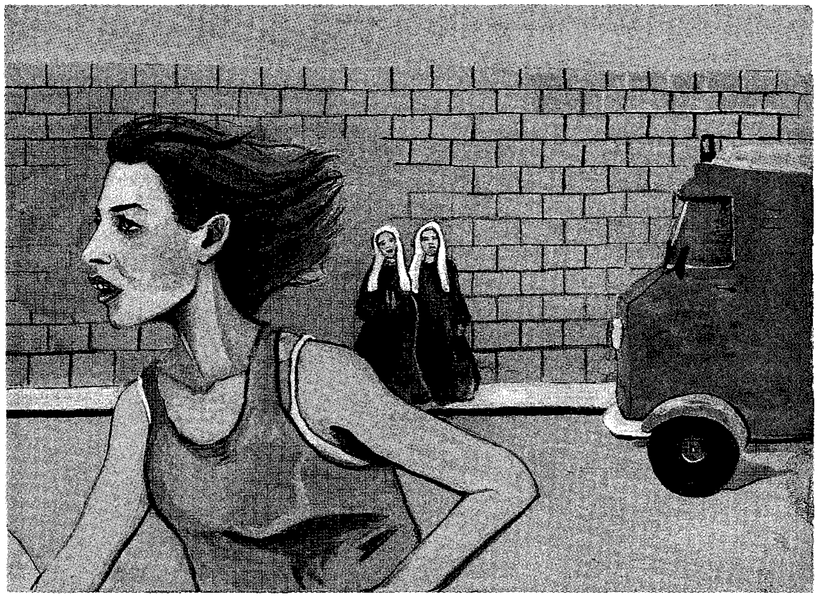
the tomb is booby-trapped by all manner of ancient curses, and, soon enough, the massed ranks of special effects arrive to take revenge. Stephen Sommers's movie has the courage of its own clichés; he piles the silliness on with such speed that you don't have the time to notice how dead and dusty most of his themes are. Fraser, however, successfully demonstrates how to be lusty and affable at the same time.—*A.L.* (5/10/99) (Astor Plaza, Chelsea Cinemas, Kips Bay Theatre, Lincoln Square, Olympia, Orpheum VII, and Union Square.)



Opening June 18, Franka Potente in Tom Tykwer's "Run Lola Run."

CHRISTINE WILCOX

Notting Hill—The first outing for screenwriter Richard Curtis and leading man Hugh Grant since their collaboration on "Four Weddings and a Funeral." The new movie is less inclined to tomfoolery; the gags are quieter and more sparsely planted. Grant plays a London bookseller named William Thacker; Julia Roberts plays Anna Scott, a movie star who wanders into his store. The two of them fall in love, then out of love, and so on; you feel lulled rather than excited by the sway of the plot, and Curtis's essentially benign attitude—most of the characters are charming but screwy, and they get along just fine—seems to tame the director, Roger Michell. The scene in which William crashes a press junket is a convincing vision of media hell, but the other pokes at celebrity are halfhearted; the problem is that Anna, who should be softening from goddess into human being, never really melts—she remains trapped in icy fame, and you can't believe that William and she would make a lasting pair. Still, there are plenty of incidental pleasures; some of the supporting players—especially Tim McInnerny as a lousy cook and Rhys Ifans as a scrofulous Welshman—threaten to steal the picture.—*A.L.* (6/7/99) (Coronet Cinemas, Criterion Center, Kips Bay Theatre, Lincoln Square, Metro Cinema, 19th Street East 6, Park & 86th Cinemas, and Village Theatre VII.)

The Phantom of the Opera (1925)—A tacky yet unforgettable piece of Guignol claptrap. The story is from a French penny dreadful (by Gaston Leroux); the first half is a dreary mess, but then the mixture of the morbid, the gaudy, the ornate, and the rotted becomes scary and, in a way that may be peculiar to movies, thrilling. Lon Chaney is the diabolical genius, Erik, who lives in the dripping cellars of the Paris opera house; hypnotically, he lures the young singer (Mary Philbin) he loves into his bedroom in the sewers and shows her his coffin bed. The director was Rupert Julian, but things were not going well, and Edward Sedgwick was brought in to finish the film; Chaney himself directed some of his own sequences. Silent.—*P.K.* (American Museum of the Moving Image; June 26.)

The Red Violin—Joshua Bell's impassioned violin soars above a dark matting of strings in John Corigliano's soundtrack score—the most valuable element to emerge from this grandiose French-Canadian movie project. In form, it's an omnibus film that chronicles, in three historical vignettes, a prologue, and an epilogue, the life of a great violin made in Cremona in the late seventeenth century. A small boy in eighteenth-century Austria, an English nineteenth-century violin virtuoso who has sex and plays wildly at the same time (quite a trick), and an isolated lover of Western music during China's Cultural Revolution are all touched by the violin's powers. But is the instrument cursed or blessed? A glory or a menace? The director-screenwriter team, François Girard and Don McKellar, don't seem to have worked out a coherent idea of what the violin means, and when they try to tie things together, in a modern auction-house scene in which representatives of the earlier owners of the violin come together and bid on the instrument, we don't care who gets the violin or why. The style of the movie veers unsuccessfully between humorless piety and opéra-bouffe clownishness. With Samuel L. Jackson as a canny rare-instrument specialist who has his own plans for the fiddle.—*D.D.* (6/14/99) (BAM Rose Cinemas, Beekman, Lincoln Plaza Cinemas, and Union Square.)

Star Wars: Episode I—The Phantom Menace—It has been more than twenty years since George Lucas directed a movie. Amid the fuss that has attended his return to the fray, no one seems to have wondered whether he was up to the task. With this film, Lucas demonstrates two facts: one, that he has kept abreast of the recent leaps in special effects, and two, that he hasn't a clue what to do with all the nondigital figures, otherwise known as "people." Three fine actors were lured into this farrago: Ewan McGregor plays the young Obi-Wan Kenobi, Liam Neeson is his Jedi mentor, Natalie Portman plays a teen-age queen, and all of them look as if they were recently abused by robots.—*A.L.* (5/24/99) (East 86th Street Cinemas, First & 62nd Cinemas, Murray Hill Cinemas, Olympia, Union Square, and Ziegfeld.)

The Story of Adèle H. (1975)—A François Truffaut film to rank with "Shoot the Piano Player," "Jules and Jim," and "The Wild Child"—and perhaps his most passionate work. The picture is damnably intelligent—almost frighteningly so, like some passages in Russian novels which strip the characters bare. And it's deeply, disharmoniously funny—which Truffaut has never been before. The story, about romantic love fulfilled by self-destruction, is based on the journals of Adèle, the daughter of Victor Hugo; she's played by the twenty-year-old Isabelle Adjani. The visual consistency attained by the cinematographer, Nestor Almendros, enables Truffaut to achieve a new concentration on character. In French.—*P.K.* (Film Forum 2; June 16.)

The Three Musketeers (1921)—Undiluted delight. The scale is lavish, the story clearly told, and Douglas Fairbanks is the dartingest of D'Artagnans, energizing every scene he's in not just with his unpredictable agility and swiftness but also with an italicized ardor—which he often, wisely, plays for laughs. This D'Artagnan's favorite expression is "Marvelous!" and Fairbanks is pretty marvellous, too, whether he's romping over rooftops with his true love, Constance, or engaging the evil Milady de Winter in a fight for the queen's jewels that turns into an Apache dance. Fred Niblo directed. Silent.—*M.S.* (American Museum of the Moving Image; June 19.)

ALSO PLAYING

AFTER LIFE: Lincoln Plaza Cinemas. . . . **DESERT BLUE:** Angelika Film Center. . . . **THE DREAMLIFE OF ANGELS** (reviewed in our issue of 4/5/99): Lincoln Plaza Cinemas and Quad Cinema. . . . **ELECTION** (4/26 & 5/3/99): Chelsea Cinemas, Kips Bay Theatre, New York Twin, 19th Street East 6, Orpheum VII, State, and Village Theatre VII. . . . **ETERNITY AND A DAY:** Lincoln Plaza Cinemas. . . . **EXISTENZ** (5/10/99): Village East Cinemas. . . . **FINDING NORTH:** Quad Cinema. . . . **JUST A LITTLE HARMLESS SEX:** 34th Street Showplace and Village East Cinemas. . . . **THE LAST CIGARETTE:** Film Forum. . . . **THE MATRIX** (4/26 & 5/3/99): Chelsea Cinemas, 84th Street Sixplex, Kips Bay Theatre, Orpheum VII, 64th and 2nd, State, and Union Square. . . . **A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM** (5/17/99): East 85th Street, Lincoln Square, New York Twin, 34th Street Showplace, Union Square, and Waverly. . . . **RETURN WITH HONOR:** Kips Bay Theatre. . . . **TEA WITH MUSSOLINI:** Angelika Film Center, Chelsea Cinemas, First & 62nd Cinemas, Kips Bay Theatre, and Lincoln Square. . . . **THE THIRD MAN** (1949): Film Forum. . . . **THE THIRTEENTH FLOOR:** Criterion Center, 84th Street Sixplex, Kips Bay Theatre, 19th Street East 6, Orpheum VII, 64th and 2nd, and Village Theatre VII. . . . **THREE SEASONS:** 59th Street East Cinema and Village East Cinemas. . . . **A WALK ON THE MOON** (4/12/99): Chelsea West, Gotham Cinema, and 34th Street Showplace. . . . **THE WINSLOW BOY** (5/17/99): Kips Bay Theatre, Lincoln Plaza Cinemas, and Union Square.

REVIVALS, CLASSICS, ETC.

(Titles with a dagger are reviewed above.)

Film Forum 2, W. Houston St. west of Sixth Ave. (727-8110)—Films directed by François Truffaut; in French, with English subtitles. June 16: "The Story of Adèle H." (†). . . . June 17-18: "Such a Gorgeous Kid Like Me" (1973). . . . June 19-20: "Small Change" (1976). . . . June 22: "The Green Room" (†). . . . June 23-24: "Day for Night" (1973). . . . ¶ Films by Harold Lloyd. June 21: "Speedy" (1928) and "The Milky Way" (1936). . . . June 28: "The Kid Brother" (1927), "Get Out and Get Under" (1920), "Haunted Spooks" (1920), and "High and Dizzy" (1920). . . . ¶ A program of films directed by or with Erich von Stroheim. June 25-27: "The Wedding March" (1928) and "Sunset Boulevard" (1950, Billy Wilder). . . . June 29: "Storm Over Lisbon" (1944, George Sherman) and "The Mask of Dijon" (1946, Lewis Landers).

Museum of Modern Art, Roy and Niuta Titus Theatres, 11 W. 53rd St. (708-9480)—A program of films released by the Strand

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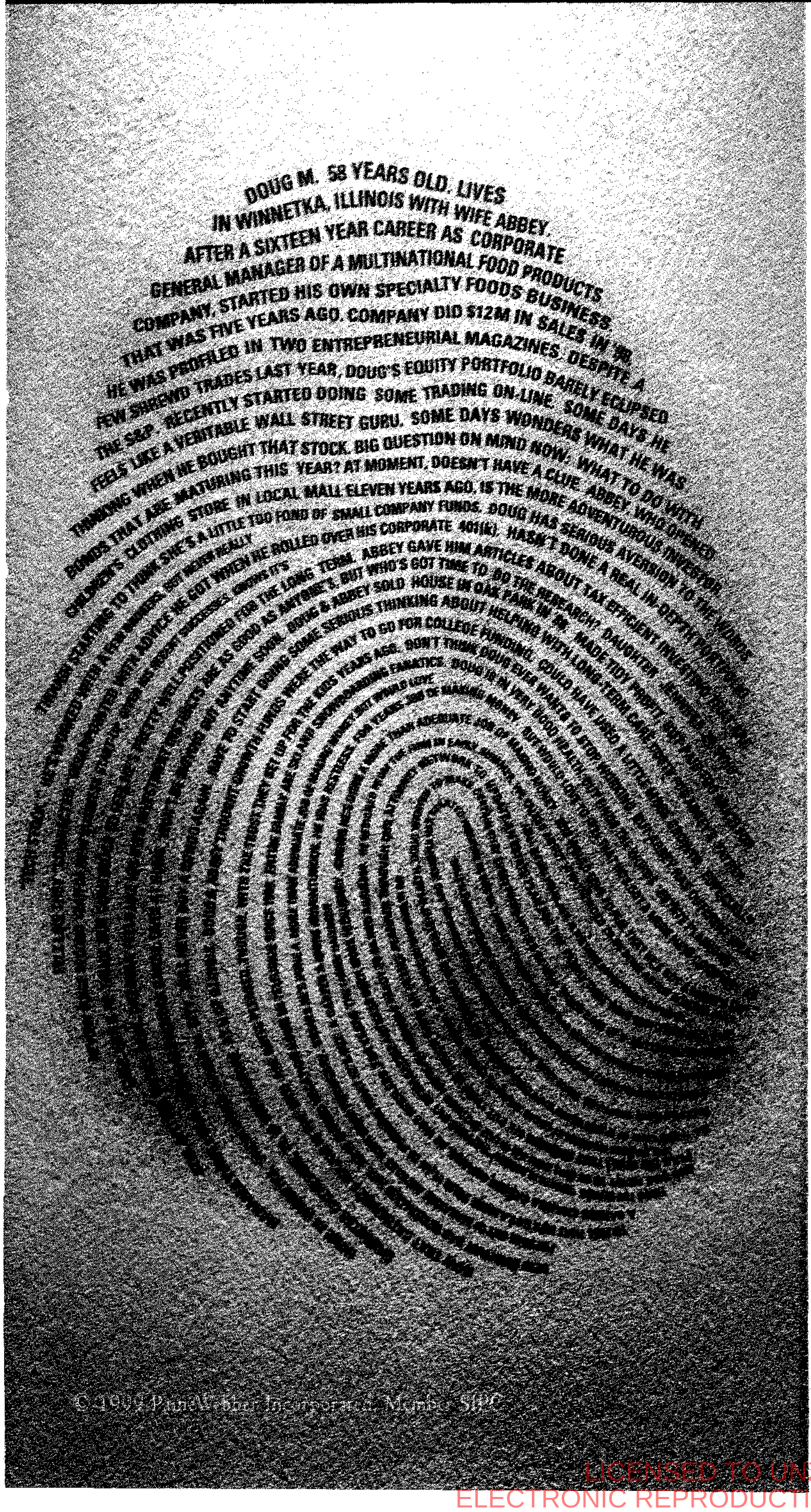
DOUG M. 58 YEARS OLD. LIVES
IN WINNETKA, ILLINOIS WITH WIFE ABBEY.
AFTER A SIXTEEN YEAR CAREER AS CORPORATE
GENERAL MANAGER OF A MULTINATIONAL FOOD PRODUCTS
COMPANY, STARTED HIS OWN SPECIALTY FOODS BUSINESS.
THAT WAS FIVE YEARS AGO. COMPANY DID $12M IN SALES IN '98.
HE WAS PROFILED IN TWO ENTREPRENEURIAL MAGAZINES. DESPITE A
FEW SHREWD TRADES LAST YEAR, DOUG'S EQUITY PORTFOLIO BARELY ECLIPSED
THE S&P. RECENTLY STARTED DOING SOME TRADING ON-LINE. SOME DAYS HE
FEELS LIKE A VERITABLE WALL STREET GURU. SOME DAYS WONDERS WHAT HE WAS
THINKING WHEN HE BOUGHT THAT STOCK. BIG QUESTION ON MIND NOW: WHAT TO DO WITH
BONDS THAT ARE MATURING THIS YEAR? AT MOMENT, DOESN'T HAVE A CLUE. ABBEY, WHO OPENED
CHILDREN'S CLOTHING STORE IN LOCAL MALL ELEVEN YEARS AGO, IS THE MORE ADVENTUROUS INVESTOR.

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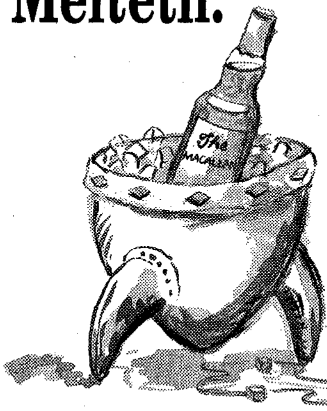

The Iceman Melteth.

A CHEQUE DRAWN ON THE BANK OF ICELAND accompanied by a request for six bottles of The Macallan Malt Whisky, started a *lively debate* at the Distillery the other day. Was it wise for these stern countrymen of ice and fire to seek out the mellow blandishments of The Macallan? That billowing sherry-oak redolence, with its hints of the *comfortable South*, should be treated with caution by the hardy sons of ERIK THE RED, argued our Moral Tutor. "A few sips could undo centuries of stoicism." But our Sales Director prevailed, and The Macallan was despatched the same evening. However, if you are planning a trip to Iceland, it might now be wise to include a paper hat and some streamers.

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Releasing company over the last ten years. June 17 at 2:30 and June 19 at 5: "Office Killer" (1997, Cindy Sherman)....June 17 at 6:30: "Steam: The Turkish Bath" (1998, Ferzan Ozpetck; in Italian and Turkish)....June 18 at 2:30 and June 24 at 6: "The Neon Bible" (1995, Terence Davies)....June 18 at 6 and June 20 at 5: "Voyage to the Beginning of the World" (1997, Manoel de Oliveira; in Portuguese)....June 18 at 8 and June 20 at 2: "East Palace, West Palace" (1997, Zhang Yuan; in Chinese)....June 19 at 2 and June 22 at 2:30: "Wild Reeds" (1995, André Téchiné; in French)....June 21 at 2:30 and June 25 at 6: "A Self-Made Hero" (1996, Jacques Audiard; in French)....June 21 at 6: "Contempt" (1963, Jean-Luc Godard; in French)....June 24 at 2:30 and June 25 at 8: "The Living End" (1991, Gregg Araki)....June 25 at 2:30 and June 26 at 5: "Nénette and Boni" (1996, Claire Denis; in French)....June 26 at 2 and June 28 at 2:30: "Genealogies of Crime" (1997, Raúl Ruiz; in French)....June 27 at 2 and June 29 at 6: "A Single Girl" (1995, Benoît Jacquot; in French)....June 27 at 5 and June 29 at 2:30: "Vive l'Amour" (1994, Tsai Ming-liang; in Chinese)....June 28 at 6: "Stonewall" (1995, Nigel Finch).... ¶ A program of films featuring or about Paul Robeson. June 18 at 6:30 and June 20 at 3: "Show Boat" (1936, James Whale)....June 19 at 1 and June 25 at 3: "Body and Soul" (1925, Oscar Micheaux)....June 19 at 3 and June 22 at 6: "Borderline" (1930, Kenneth McPherson)....June 19 at 5: "The Emperor Jones" (1933, Dudley Murphy)....June 20 at 12:45 and June 24 at 6: "Sanders of the River" (1935, Zoltán Korda)....June 20 at 5:15 and June 25 at 8: "Song of Freedom" (1936, J. Elder Wills) and "My Song Goes Forth" (1937, Joseph Best)....June 21 at 6: "Paul Robeson: Here I Stand" (1998, St. Clair Bourne)....June 25 at 6 and June 26 at 1: "Big Fella" (1937, Wills)....June 26 at 3: "King Solomon's Mines" (1937, Robert Stevenson)....June 26 at 5: "Jericho" (1937, Thornton Freeland)....June 27 at 1: "The Proud Valley" (1939, Penrose Tennyson)....June 27 at 3: "Tales of Manhattan" (1942, Julien Duvivier)....June 27 at 5:15: "Native Land" (1942, Leo Hurwitz and Paul Strand)....June 28 at 6: "Song of the Rivers" (1954, Joris Ivens)....June 29 at 6: "Paul Robeson and Earl Robinson Sing for the GDR" (1954; in English and German) and "Paul Robeson" (1958, Vasily Kantian; in German and English).... ¶ June 22 at 6: "Meet Me in St. Louis" (1944, Vincente Minnelli).

Walter Reade Theatre, Lincoln Center (875-5600)—Through June 24: The 1999 Human Rights Watch International Film Festival.... ¶ A program of films directed by Max Ophuls. June 25 at 1, 5:15, and 9:15, June 26 at 4:30 and 8:45, and June 27 at 2 and 6:15: "Letter from an Unknown Woman" (†)....June 25 at 3 and 7:15, June 26 at 6:30, and June 27 at 4 and 8:15: "The Earring of Madame de . . ." (†)....June 28 at 1, 5, and 9: "The Reckless Moment" (1949)....June 28 at 3 and 7: "La Signora di Tutti" (1934, in Italian).

American Museum of the Moving Image, 35th Ave. at 36th St., Astoria (718-784-0077)—A program of silent films (with live piano music by Donald Sosin) starring Rudoph Valentino, Douglas Fairbanks, John Barrymore, or Lon Chaney. June 19 at 2: "The Three Musketeers" (†)....June 19 at 5: "The Black Bird" (1926, Tod Browning)....June 20 at 2:30: "The Beloved Rogue" (1927, Alan Crosland)....June 20 at 5: "Monsieur Beaucaire" (1924, Sidney Olcott)....June 26 at 2: "Phantom of the Opera" (†)....June 26 at 5: "Tempest" (1928, Sam Taylor)....June 27 at 2:30: "The Eagle" (†)....June 27 at 5: "The Thief of Bagdad" (1924, Raoul Walsh).

Bryant Park, Sixth Ave. at 42nd St.—Mondays, starting at dusk: free drive-in-style moviegoing, beginning with coming attractions, trailers, and cartoons. The feature on June 21 will be "Anatomy of a Murder" (1959, Otto Preminger); on June 28, "All About Eve" (1950, Joseph L. Mankiewicz). (For rain-date information, call 512-5700.)

Anthology Film Archives, 32 Second Ave., at 2nd St. (505-5110)—June 24-25 at 7 and 9, June 26 at 4 and 9:30, June 27 at 6 and 8, and June 29 at 7:30: "The Broken Giant" (1996, Estep Nagy).... ¶ A program of Stanley Kubrick films. June 24 at 6:30, June 26 at 5:30, and June 27 at 2:30: "Killer's Kiss" (1955)....June 24 at 8, June 26 at 7, and June 27 at 4: "The Killing" (1956)....June 24 at 10, June 26 at 9, and June 27 at 6: "Paths of Glory" (1957)....June 25 at 7:15, 9:15, and 11:15 and June 26 at 11: "Dr. Strangelove" (1964)....June 26 at 2 and June 27 at 8: "Spartacus" (1960).

Florence Gould Hall, 55 E. 59th St. (355-6160)—June 22 at 12:30, 3:30, 6:30, and 9: "Gadjo Dilo" (1997, Tony Gatlif; in French, Romany, and Romanian)....June 29 at 12:30, 3:30, 6:30, and 9: "Genealogies of Crime" (1997, Raúl Ruiz; in French).

A Different Light Bookstore, 151 W. 19th St.—A Sunday-night series of free films (and popcorn). On June 20 at 7, the feature will be "Showgirls" (1995, Paul Verhoven); on June 27 at 7: "Valley of the Dolls" (1967, Mark Robson).

THEATRE ADDRESSES

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(For show times, call 777-FILM, except where noted.)

Angelika Film Center, 18 W. Houston St.
Art Greenwich Twin, Greenwich Ave. at 12th St.
Astor Plaza, 44th St. at Broadway.
BAM Rose Cinemas, 30 Lafayette Ave., Brooklyn (718-623-2770).
Beekman, Second Ave. at 66th St.
Chelsea Cinemas, 260 W. 23rd St.
Chelsea West, 333 W. 23rd St.
Cinema I, Third Ave. at 60th St.
Cinema II, Third Ave. at 60th St.
Cinema 3rd Avenue, Third Ave. at 60th St.
Cinema Village, 22 E. 12th St. (924-3363).
Coronet Cinemas, Third Ave. at 59th St.
Criterion Center, Broadway at 44th St.
East 85th Street, First Ave. at 85th St.
East 86th Street Cinemas, Third Ave. at 86th St.
Eastside Playhouse, Third Ave. at 55th St.
84th Street Sixplex, Broadway at 84th St.
59th Street East Cinema, 239 E. 59th St.
Film Forum, W. Houston St. west of Sixth Ave. (727-8110).
First & 62nd Cinemas, 400 E. 62nd St.
Gotham Cinema, Third Ave. at 58th St.
Guild, 33 W. 50th St.
Kips Bay Theatre, Second Ave. at 32nd St.
Lincoln Plaza Cinemas, Broadway at 63rd St.
Lincoln Square, Broadway at 68th St.
Metro Cinema 1 and 2, Broadway at 99th St.
Murray Hill Cinemas, 160 E. 34th St.
New York Twin, Second Ave. at 67th St.
19th Street East 6, Broadway at 19th St.
Olympia I and II, Broadway at 107th St.
Orpheum VII, Third Ave. at 86th St.
Paris, 4 W. 58th St. (688-3800).
Park & 86th Street Cinemas, 125 E. 86th St.
Quad Cinema, 34 W. 13th St.
The Screening Room, 54 Varick St. (334-2100).
62nd & Broadway, 62 W. 62nd St.
64th and 2nd, Second Ave. at 64th St.
72nd Street East, Third Ave. at 71st St.
State, Broadway at 45th St.
Sutton 1 and 2, Third Ave. at 57th St.
34th Street Showplace, 238 E. 34th St.
Union Square, Broadway at 13th St.
Village East Cinemas, Second Ave. at 12th St.
Village Theatre VII, Third Ave. at 11th St.
Waverly 1 and 2, Sixth Ave. at 3rd St.
Worldwide Cinemas, 50th St. between Eighth and Ninth Aves.
Ziegfeld, 141 W. 54th St.

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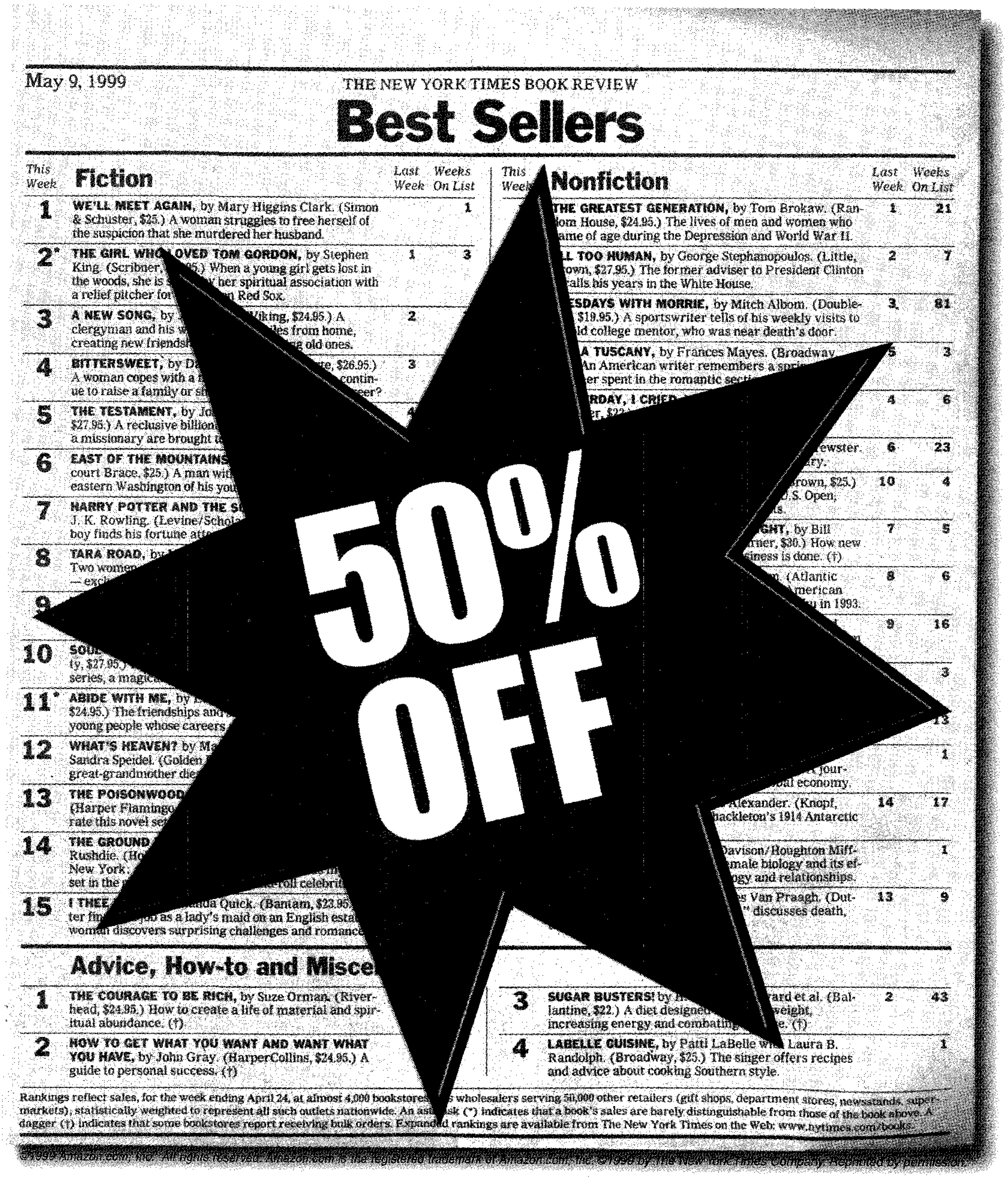

May 9, 1999

THE NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW

Best Sellers

This Week	Fiction	Last Week	Weeks On List
1	**WE'LL MEET AGAIN,** by Mary Higgins Clark. (Simon & Schuster, $25.) A woman struggles to free herself of the suspicion that she murdered her husband.		1
2*	**THE GIRL WHO OVED TOM GORDON,** by Stephen King. (Scribner, 95.) When a young girl gets lost in the woods, she is y her spiritual association with a relief pitcher for n Red Sox.	1	3
3	**A NEW SONG,** by Viking, $24.95.) A clergyman and his w les from home, creating new friendsh g old ones.	2	
4	**BITTERSWEET,** by D e, $26.95.) A woman copes with a contin- ue to raise a family or sh eer?	3	
5	**THE TESTAMENT,** by Jo $27.95.) A reclusive billion a missionary are brought t	4	
6	**EAST OF THE MOUNTAINS** court Brace, $25.) A man wit eastern Washington of his you		
7	**HARRY POTTER AND THE S** J. K. Rowling. (Levine/Schol boy finds his fortune att		
8	**TARA ROAD,** by Two women — exc		
9			
10	**SOU** ty, $27.95.) series, a magic		
11*	**ABIDE WITH ME,** by $24.95.) The friendships and young people whose careers		
12	**WHAT'S HEAVEN?** by Ma Sandra Speidel. (Golden great-grandmother die		
13	**THE POISONWOOD** (Harper Flamingo rate this novel se		
14	**THE GROUND** Rushdie. (Ho New York. set in the roll celebrit		
15	**I THEE** anda Quick. (Bantam, $23.95. ter fin as a lady's maid on an English esta woman discovers surprising challenges and romance		

This Week	Nonfiction	Last Week	Weeks On List
	THE GREATEST GENERATION, by Tom Brokaw. (Ran- om House, $24.95.) The lives of men and women who ame of age during the Depression and World War II.	1	21
	LL TOO HUMAN, by George Stephanopoulos. (Little, own, $27.95.) The former adviser to President Clinton alls his years in the White House.	2	7
	ESDAYS WITH MORRIE, by Mitch Albom. (Double- $19.95.) A sportswriter tells of his weekly visits to ld college mentor, who was near death's door.	3	81
	A TUSCANY, by Frances Mayes. (Broadway An American writer remembers a spri er spent in the romantic secti	5	3
	RDAY, I CRIED er, $22	4	6
	ewster. ary.	6	23
	rown, $25.) .S. Open, s.	10	4
	GHT, by Bill rner, $30.) How new siness is done. (†)	7	5
	n. (Atlantic merican in 1993.	8	6
		9	16
			3
			13
	jour- al economy.		1
	Alexander. (Knopf, hackleton's 1914 Antarctic	14	17
	Davison/Houghton Miff- male biology and its ef- ogy and relationships.		1
	s Van Praagh. (Dut- " discusses death,	13	9

Advice, How-to and Misce

This Week		Last Week	Weeks On List
1	**THE COURAGE TO BE RICH,** by Suze Orman. (Riverhead, $24.95.) How to create a life of material and spiritual abundance. (†)		
2	**HOW TO GET WHAT YOU WANT AND WANT WHAT YOU HAVE,** by John Gray. (HarperCollins, $24.95.) A guide to personal success. (†)		
3	**SUGAR BUSTERS!** by ard et al. (Ballantine, $22.) A diet designed weight, increasing energy and combatin e. (†)	2	43
4	**LABELLE CUISINE,** by Patti LaBelle w Laura B. Randolph. (Broadway, $25.) The singer offers recipes and advice about cooking Southern style.		1

Rankings reflect sales, for the week ending April 24, at almost 4,000 bookstores s wholesalers serving 50,000 other retailers (gift shops, department stores, newsstands, supermarkets), statistically weighted to represent all such outlets nationwide. An ast sk (*) indicates that a book's sales are barely distinguishable from those of the book above. A dagger (†) indicates that some bookstores report receiving bulk orders. Expand d rankings are available from The New York Times on the Web: www.nytimes.com/books.

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THE
NEW YORKER

THE TALK OF THE TOWN

COMMENT

Reading ahead.

THIS special summer fiction issue began with what seemed like such a simple, straightforward question: "Who are the twenty best young fiction writers in America today?" So why then did it become so complicated? First, there was that word "best." How was *that* to be defined? In an issue given over to young writers, does "best" mean "most promising" or "most accomplished"? We settled on a definition that includes both senses, and tried to accommodate the obvious names and the not-so-obvious, those who are only just now crossing a threshold of literary recognition and those who have been at home in it for some time. Then, there was the question of "young." In any of the other arts, youth is defined easily enough: it's people in their twenties. But fiction writing is different: there are remarkably few prodigies, and it's revealing that it takes years, decades even, before some writers really begin using language as something to make stories with. Many of them are well into their thirties, often their forties, even their *late* forties. We settled on forty, that would be our cutoff age, and then went about picking our top twenty. Why twenty? In fact, why not two dozen, or even three dozen—the talent is there. But we wanted to come up with a number that could be represented by new work in our pages. This, too, turned out to be complicated: in the end, we couldn't fit everybody in. And so, even though this is our largest fiction issue ever, five authors are represented here only by the openings of their stories—like teasers in the cinema—which will be published in their entirety during the next five issues.

What are we to make of this snapshot of a generation on the eve of the next century? Consider what such a list would have looked like a hundred years ago, in a magazine dated June 28, 1899. It's unlikely, for instance, that Willa Cather would have found a place in it; she was twenty-six, and an acerbic critic with a wicked temper and an intolerance of mediocrity, but she wouldn't publish her first novel for thirteen more years. Similarly, Edith Wharton, at thirty-seven, had to her credit only a collection of stories and a book about the lavish furnishings of upper-class homes. "The House of Mirth" would appear six years later, when she was forty-three. Theodore Dreiser, then twenty-seven, was a journalist, a working hack ("Sister Carrie" would appear the following year), and Jack London had written only a bunch of Klondike tales. There was Stephen Crane, of course (adventure writing was all the rage, as it is now), and Frank Norris, but the picture on offer is of a peculiarly directionless generation. Henry James, then fifty-six, cast a proverbially long literary shadow, even from England. But so did England itself, whose literature still intimidated most Americans. Let us discipline and steel ourselves to fashion that "desirable thing, an American school of fiction," Frank Norris wrote, at the turn of the century, in his hortatory polemic "Novelists of the Future." Norris, who bravely regarded the novel as one of the three most important "molders of Public opinion and Public morals" (the two others were the newspaper and the pulpit), now seems so quaintly, bracingly ignorant of everything that was in store. Seen from here, the year 1899 is remarkable not for its writers but for its toddlers. Hemingway, Borges, Nabokov—all were born that year. Faulkner was just out of diapers.

The novel, in the century that followed, would no longer be seen as an important molder of much of anything. All art forms would undergo the now familiar revolutions of our century, but it's possible that the novel's was the most turbulent. It would be politicized, existentialized, modernized, postmodernized, post-postmodernized, deconstructed, and reconstructed. It would be paperbacked, mass-marketed, pulped, and Oprahed. It would abandon narrative, imitate thought, abandon thought, imitate formless thought, abandon formless thought, imitate formlessness, abandon formlessness, and rediscover form. It would become exhausted, then die, and then somehow survive its Wake, and its many imitations. It would be pinched by Borges, puffed out by Grass, reshaped by Calvino, and, finally, come to rest, poised on the eve of another century. And what now do

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LIFE

IS NEVER

PERFECT.

OR IS IT?

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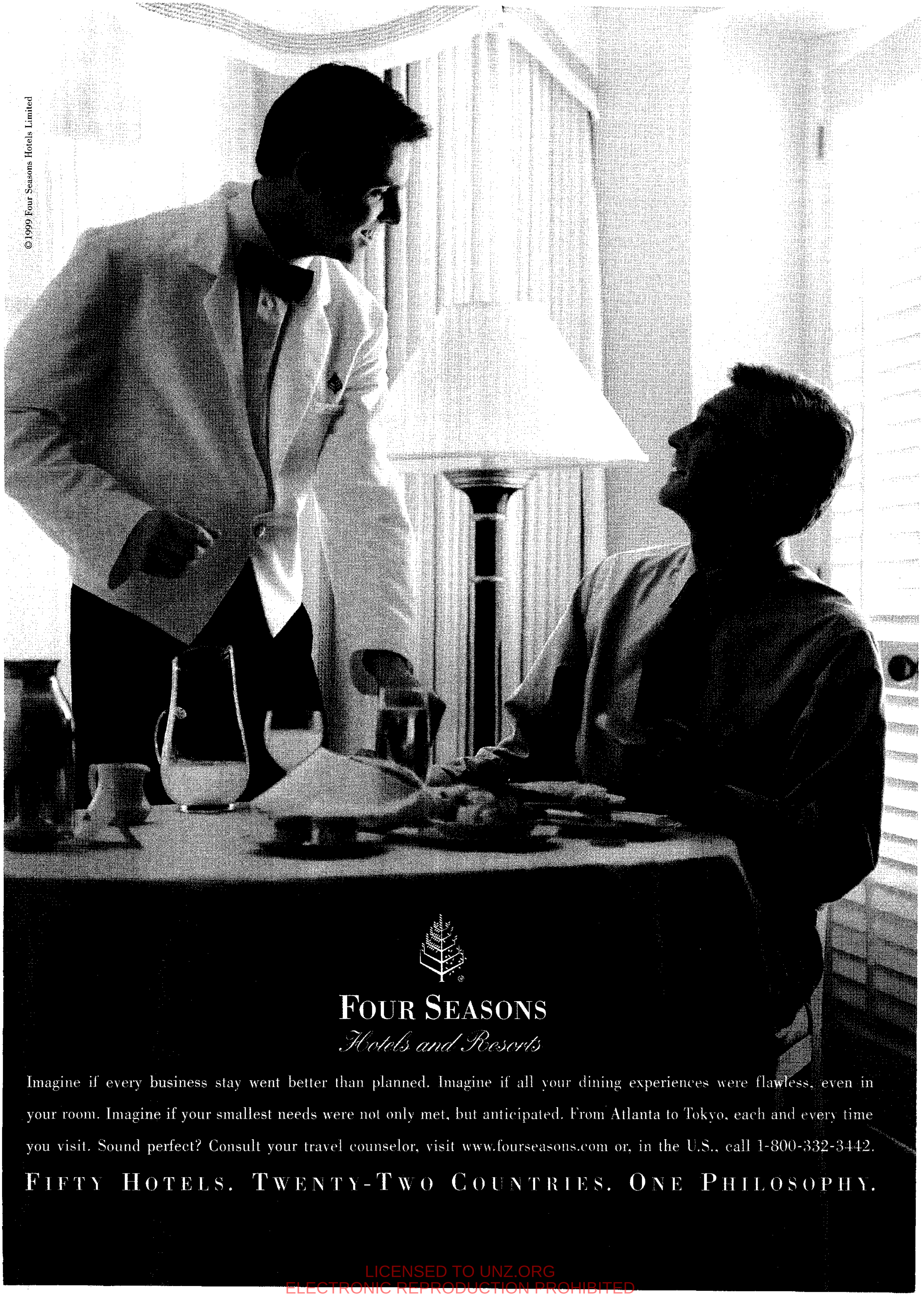

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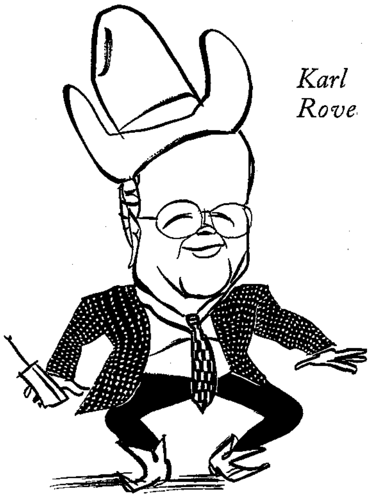
we find? A surprising thing: a generation flamboyantly at ease writing fiction.

While you'll find no unifying voice—there couldn't be with twenty writers—there is an astonishingly unifying confidence. Where does that come from? Don't these people know that the novel was once regarded as dead? There is also an astonishing facility with the tools of fiction writing. Displayed in these pages you'll see the range of what's available to the novelist, formally, at the end of the twentieth century: surrealistic impressionism (Rick Moody, A.M. Homes), the dramatic monologue (David Foster Wallace and George Saunders), the use of history as narrative (Chang-rae Lee and Michael Chabon) or as fabrication (William T. Vollmann), and even old-fashioned, raucous, belly-laugh shtick (Donald Antrim, Matthew Klam). But there is also a certain kind of story being told: the story of becoming American. Jhumpa Lahiri, Edwidge Danticat, and Junot Díaz give us contemporary versions of the immigrant's twilight account of leaving home—India, Haiti, the Dominican Republic. A related interest informs the work of others. Jeffrey Eugenides is writing a novel that, while concerned with complexities of gender (like the story in this issue), originates with his grandparents' journey from Greece in the early part of the century. Michael Chabon is writing a novel inspired by his grandparents' journey from Central Europe in the thirties and the life they made for themselves in New York. Tony Earley also writes about the thirties—the Depression era of his grandparents. A half dozen of the other writers who were considered for this collection are writing stories of immigrant arrival, too. It is ironic that the American novel should return, now, to telling the stories that Frank Norris's contemporaries were living. There is an appeal in the symmetry. And something else: a curious reassurance, as though fiction offered us, here at the end of this fragmented century of dispersal and aloneness, a way of being reconnected. What is the future of American fiction? We can't know. But the Polaroid of this generation, snapped as the century turns, offers a satisfying picture of a highly accomplished group of writers robustly taking on the stories of their Americanness. —Bill Buford

THE POLITICAL LIFE

Meet George W. Bush's brain.

In the era of "Wag the Dog," no Presidential campaign would be complete without a Machiavellian campaign consultant. So perhaps the surest sign that George W. Bush is really going to run is that tall tales have begun to circulate about the man his opponents have dubbed Bush's Brain.



Karl Rove

Karl Rove, Bush's longtime political adviser, seems an unlikely Svengali. An owlish forty-eight-year-old Westerner, Rove never graduated from college, but he has been at the center of every major Republican political victory in Texas since 1982 and has earned the grudging respect of rival campaigns. The former Clinton White House counsellor Paul Begala says, "Bush has spectacular people skills, but an average brain for a politician." Rove, on the other hand, "has a spectacular brain and average people skills." Observers say that it is Rove who has created the aura of inevitability around Bush.

But, in the quest to smooth the way for Bush, Rove has become controversial. According to a number of staffers on rival Republican Presidential campaigns, Rove offered to pay Iowa's Republican Party if it would agree to cancel the state's August 14th straw poll—one of the first highly publicized hurdles on the campaign schedule—because he feared that Bush might not do well. (The money would have offset the estimated four hundred thousand dollars that the straw poll raises for the Party through registration fees.) Gopal Krishna, the co-chairman of the Republican Party of Iowa, said last week that on March 22nd, at a private meeting at party headquarters, in Des Moines, Rove asked, "What does it take to cancel the straw poll?" Krishna added, "But just because he asked the question doesn't mean that he was willing to put the money down. It was just an inquiry, not an offer." Rove declined to be interviewed, but David Beckwith, a spokesman for the Bush campaign, said that the conversation "was just one of Karl's lame attempts at humor."

The rumor about Rove dovetails with stories of his early career. After the Watergate break-in, in July of 1972, the Washington *Post* reported that Rove had taught "dirty tricks" to the College Republicans, an organization that he and Lee Atwater headed. According to the *Post*, Rove once posed as a Democrat in order to obtain campaign stationery, and then sent out a thousand fake invitations to hippies and other assorted deadbeats offering "free beer, free food, girls, and a good time for nothing" at the opening of a Democratic campaign headquarters. The few actual contributors at the event were lost in a crowd of scruffy freeloaders. Rove has dismissed the episode as a youthful political prank.

Even Begala, who is as staunch as Democrats come, doubts that Rove would engage in what he calls "dirtbag politics" on behalf of the Bush campaign. "He's too smart, setting aside the ethics, to do smear politics, just as a matter of strategy," Begala said. "Moreover, he's a decent guy." —Jane Mayer

NAME THAT TUNE DEPT.

A wide-eyed American engineers the first karaoke airlift.

Even Ed Beason will admit that karaoke for the Kosovo refugees is not an immediately obvious idea. "Possibly, I'm nuts," he said the other day, before boarding a flight at Kennedy airport on the first leg of his journey to Albania. In his luggage he hauled one Panasonic G700 karaoke machine, several speakers, one television monitor (for song lyrics),

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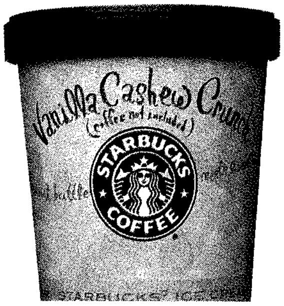
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some forty karaoke CDs, three microphones, and an assortment of electrical adapters. He also took three hundred toothbrushes and a hundred dollars' worth of Crayola crayons. As for the six hundred feet of Christmas lights stowed in the overhead compartment, he planned to drape those around his karaoke tent to make things a bit more festive.

Last month, Beason, a lanky thirty-year-old with a contagious grin, quit his job with a Web-site-design firm in lower Manhattan and began making calls to volunteer his services in the refugee camps. He knew that not just anyone can join up with an aid organization. "You can send in your résumé and say what a great job you would do," he said. "But you have to offer something concrete." He came up with karaoke.

Amber Surrency, a program officer with Relief International, bought Beason's pitch. Speaking by telephone from Tirana, Albania, she said, "Everyone's so incredibly bored in the camps. There's no entertainment, and this is at least something to do."

Within a week, Beason had solicited donations from more than a dozen companies. To help him figure out what kind of music to bring, Surrency took a poll of her Albanian colleagues. She compiled a list that included Elton John, the Backstreet Boys, Bryan Adams, and Cher. But Beason couldn't be too choosy. (His final lineup included "Aloha Oe," "Jingle Bells," and "Burning Love.")

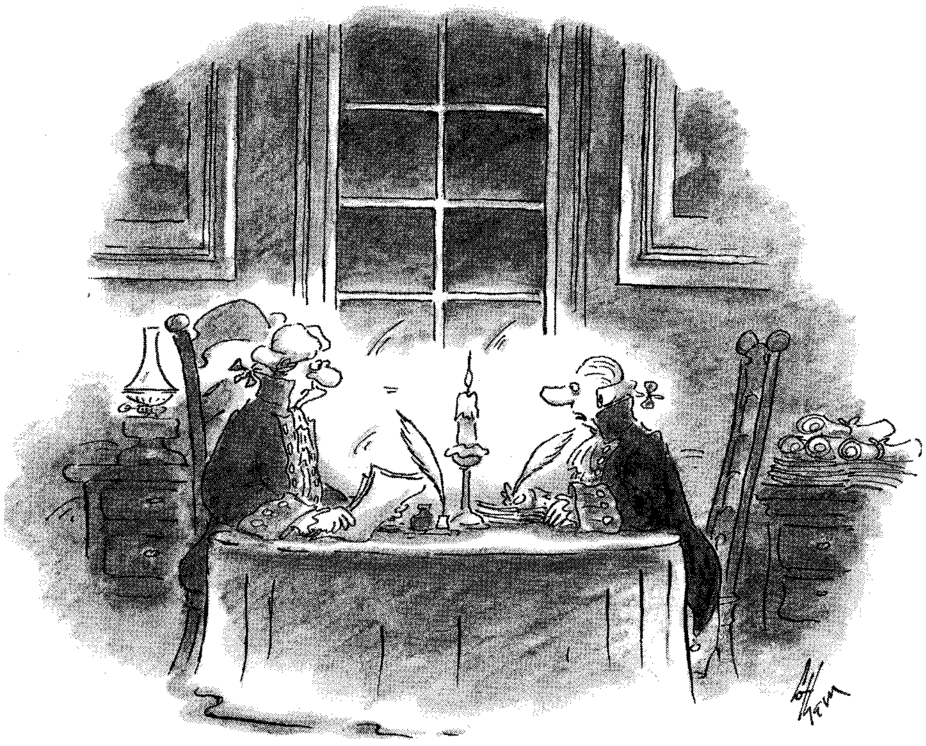
As it turned out, the donations almost went unused. Beason was welcomed in Korce, Albania, by a committee of excited refugees and aid workers, who were distressed to hear that his karaoke machine had been badly damaged in transit. "In my wildest dreams I could not have anticipated the disappointment of my new associates," Beason wrote in an E-mail last week. He succeeded in getting the machine fixed, however, and soon he was setting up his tent at Camp Qutrom.

Because the camp's power lines were overloaded, Beason couldn't use the Christmas lights. So he spent a morning cutting three hundred stars out of scrap paper. The camp's education director dispatched forty children to help, and they swarmed around the karaoke tent, taping the stars to the lifeless strings of lights. Security guards whom the children had described to Beason as Kosovo Liberation Army "killer types" hovered nearby. "They wanted to know, did I have Elton John? What Elton John did I have?" Beason wrote.

At the appointed hour, more than two hundred spectators crowded into the tent as Beason stepped out from behind a tarp and launched into an Elvis tune—"Can't Help Falling in Love." When no one volunteered to take the stage after Beason's second number ("All of Me"), he began to get panicky. In the end, though, about twenty performers came forward. An Albanian Salvation Army cook and a seven-year-old boy performed a duet on Jefferson Airplane's "Somebody to Love." A five-year-old girl got some mileage out of "Jingle Bells." And a grandmother "nearly shimmied out of her top," according to Beason, doing "Sentimental Journey."

Beason has found that, so far, children have been dominating the microphone. But then, as one camp administrator put it, even most American adults don't sing karaoke when they're sober.

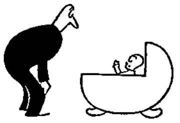
—NINA TEICHOLZ



"Perhaps we should provide for the separation of state and entertainment."

ENDANGERED SPECIES DEPT.

A lament for Father's Day.



ONCE when I was in college, I took off with a friend on a late-adolescent cross-country drive. The first stop was my friend's grandfather's house, in Westport, Connecticut, and it turned out that the guy had invented Father's Day as we know it. He was a retired advertising man named Alvin Austin. In the nineteen-thirties, representing a consortium of menswear firms, Mr. Austin set about turning the quieter parental holiday—which had been first proclaimed by the State of Washington in 1910, without anyone's noticing—into a blockbuster. Pretty soon there was a lavishly publicized annual luncheon at a New York hotel during which Mr. Austin, on behalf of the National Father's Day Committee, conferred the Father of the Year Medal on the likes of Dwight Eisenhower and Douglas MacArthur. I remember being not so much impressed as disillusioned by this. Father's Day had had to be invented?

That was just the first in a long string of shaky moments. Today, the estate of fathers has fallen to the point where we have become the object of constant, suspiciously cheerful celebration, behind which seems to lurk a bitter sense of marginalization: we're on our way to becoming an oppressed minority. The

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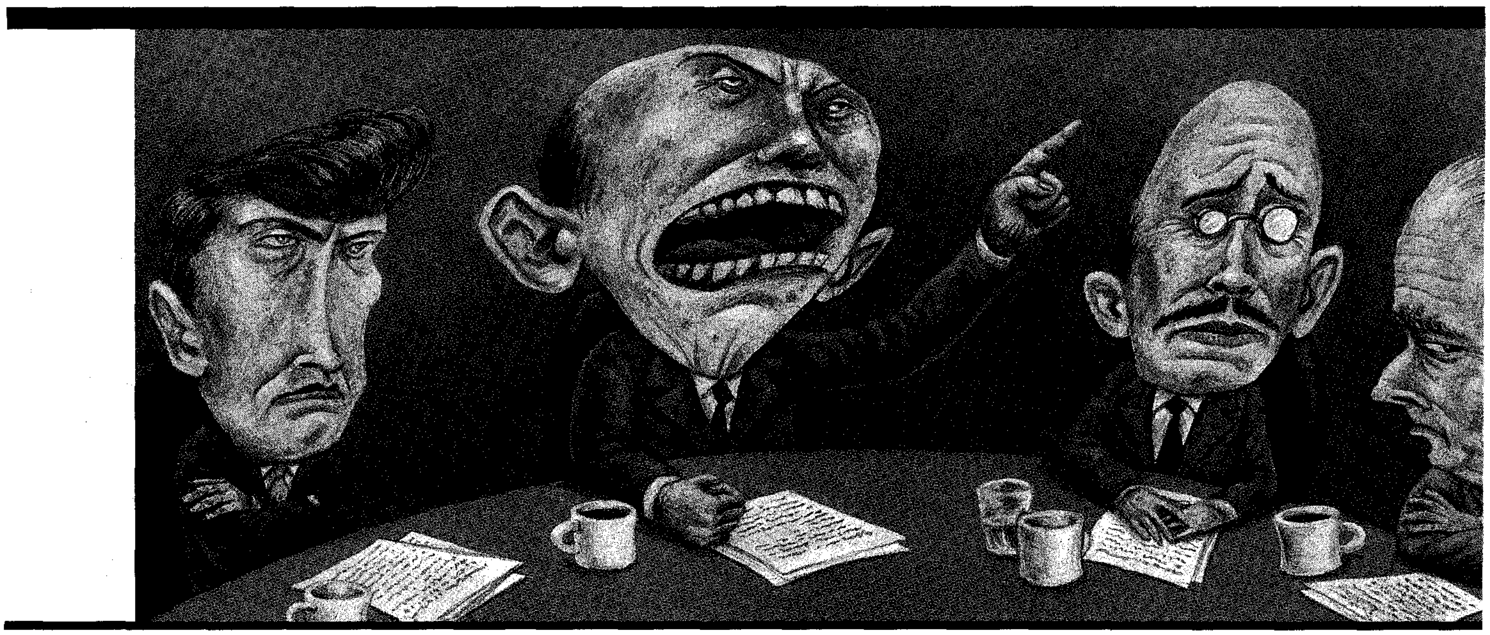
In an age in which politics, journalism and show business have begun to merge, pundits have increasingly become performers, and performers posture and declaim - that's what they do. As long as political commentators, like sports-radio jocks, are hired on the basis of who has the loudest, most obnoxiously nasal voice, we'll be forced to endure their sermons. And as long as those commentators remain drawn from a stagnant, inbred pool, those sermons will be inane next page | www.salon.com/ny



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makes you think

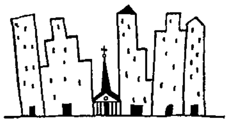
new culture of official encouragement of fatherhood encompasses mass movements like the Million Man March and Promise Keepers, reformist initiatives like the Ford Foundation's "Fragile Families" project, an official government report called "Nurturing Fatherhood" (get it?), and a nascent academic specialty. Last year, a Republican congressman, E. Clay Shaw, of Florida, proposed a two-billion-dollar federal program to help fathers. This week, one of Shaw's leading allies, Wade Horn, of the National Fatherhood Initiative, will convene a summit meeting on urban fatherhood, in Washington.

What has brought fathers to this aid-requiring point is the enormous increase over the last generation in divorce, working mothers, and out-of-wedlock childbearing. The function of fathers used to be simple: marry, reproduce, and go out and earn the money to support the household. These days, we need a more elaborate justification. When society's attention started to be paid to fathers, in the early nineties, it came mostly in the form of devising legal means of extracting money from "deadbeat dads." Today, there are forty-four thousand child-support-enforcement officers in the United States. What would be great, from the point of view of fathers, would be some research showing that we're good for more than writing checks—that spending time with our children, loving them, changing their diapers, helping them with their homework, and so on, causes them to blossom. Alas, the field of fatherhood studies has gone looking for evidence of this and, so far, hasn't found much. In a new paper, Julien Teitler, of Princeton University, writes, "The bad news for fathers is that . . . it failed to demonstrate a clear impact of involvement on the well-being of mothers and children."

What if it turns out that all those soccer practices were a waste of time? Then we'll have no choice but to do what our forefathers, as fathers, always did; namely, become mysterious and remote. People will overestimate our power and build their lives around uncontrollable feelings that they project onto us. Although Mr. Austin invented the modern Father's Day, he didn't invent the paternal technique of impressing by remaining distant. That development is recorded in the Book of Genesis. —NICHOLAS LEMANN

THE CREATIVE LIFE

Dancing in the aisles downtown.



As Larry Fagin remembers it, he was going about his duties at the Poetry Project at St. Mark's Church in-the-Bowery when a group of six women appeared, told him that they were called the Natural History of the American Dancer, and said that they wanted to perform in the church's sanctuary. To this rather alarming event, which occurred in 1974, we owe the birth of St. Mark's Danspace Project, one of the most distinguished dance series in downtown Manhattan, and certainly the best housed. St. Mark's Church, at Second Avenue and Tenth Street, was consecrated in 1799, and it looks like an eighteenth-century dream of Heaven: bliss rationalized. Low arches, an embracing balcony, seventeen dainty columns culminating in leafy crowns—this is a space that could make bad dance look good.

Actually, dance was an old story at St. Mark's. Already in the early years of the century, people seeking Episcopal services were in short supply in the East Village. The vestry described the church as "almost in the position of a mission station in a foreign land," the natives being artists and paupers. But the rector, William Norman Guthrie, preferred artists and paupers, and saw them as the natural audience for his new kind of mystico-universalist service, featuring art slides, poetry, and—most critical to his teaching—dancers. According to a history of St. Mark's, "Subjects for these rituals included such diverse works as Kahlil Gibran's 'The Prophet'; an Egyptian poem invoking the sun god, Amen-Ra; a dance of the Zuni Cornmaidens."

The press had a good time with Dr. Guthrie's services. A 1925 headline in the *Times* read, "WOMEN FAINT IN JAM AT MYSTIC SERVICE—BORNE FROM ST. MARK'S AS GIRLS DANCE. . . . RECTOR DECLAIMS IN BLANK VERSE." Such publicity did not endear Guthrie to his bishop.

Guthrie retired in 1937, and St. Mark's quieted down for a while. Then came the sixties, and a new wave of cornmaidens. Under the parish administrator Stephen Facey, St. Mark's presented jazz concerts, underground movies, and poetry readings. A few years after the dancers arrived, the pews were removed. Episcopal services are still held at St. Mark's twice a week. Dance performances are held four times a week.

In a recent issue of *Movement Research*, Danspace veterans reminisce. The lighting director Carol Mullins recalls a piece by Liz Pasquale that "began abstractly with a dancer wrapped in toilet paper rolling into the space on a bed . . . of rolling pins, and grew into the story of a topless dancer." Sara Rudner writes that when she was invited to appear at Danspace she was tired of "conventional time frames," so she made a five-hour piece, "Dancing-on-View." Yoshiko Chuma describes her 1983 "5 Car Pile-Up," which featured sixty-seven performers and ten bicycles.

This year is Danspace's twenty-fifth anniversary, and the church's two-hundredth. The occasion is being honored in a six-month "Silver Series," with performances by the Danspace artists Meredith Monk, Douglas Dunn, Steve Paxton, Wendy Perron, Ishmael Houston-Jones, Neil Greenberg, Tere O'Connor, and others. This weekend, Chuma will perform excerpts from "5 Car Pile-Up," and on Saturday afternoon Rudner will reprise "Dancing-on-View." She says she's got it down to four hours.

—JOAN ACOCELLA

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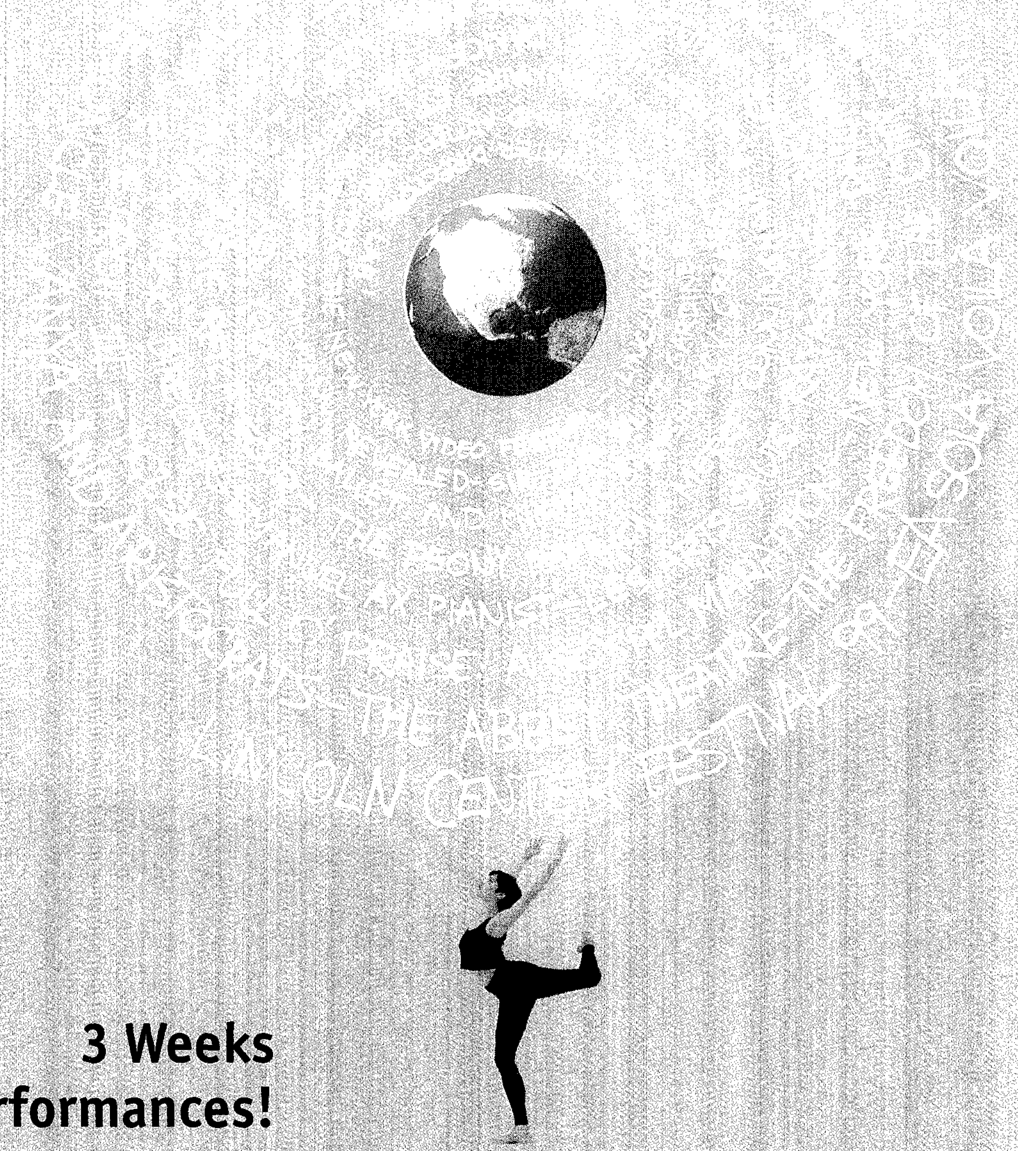

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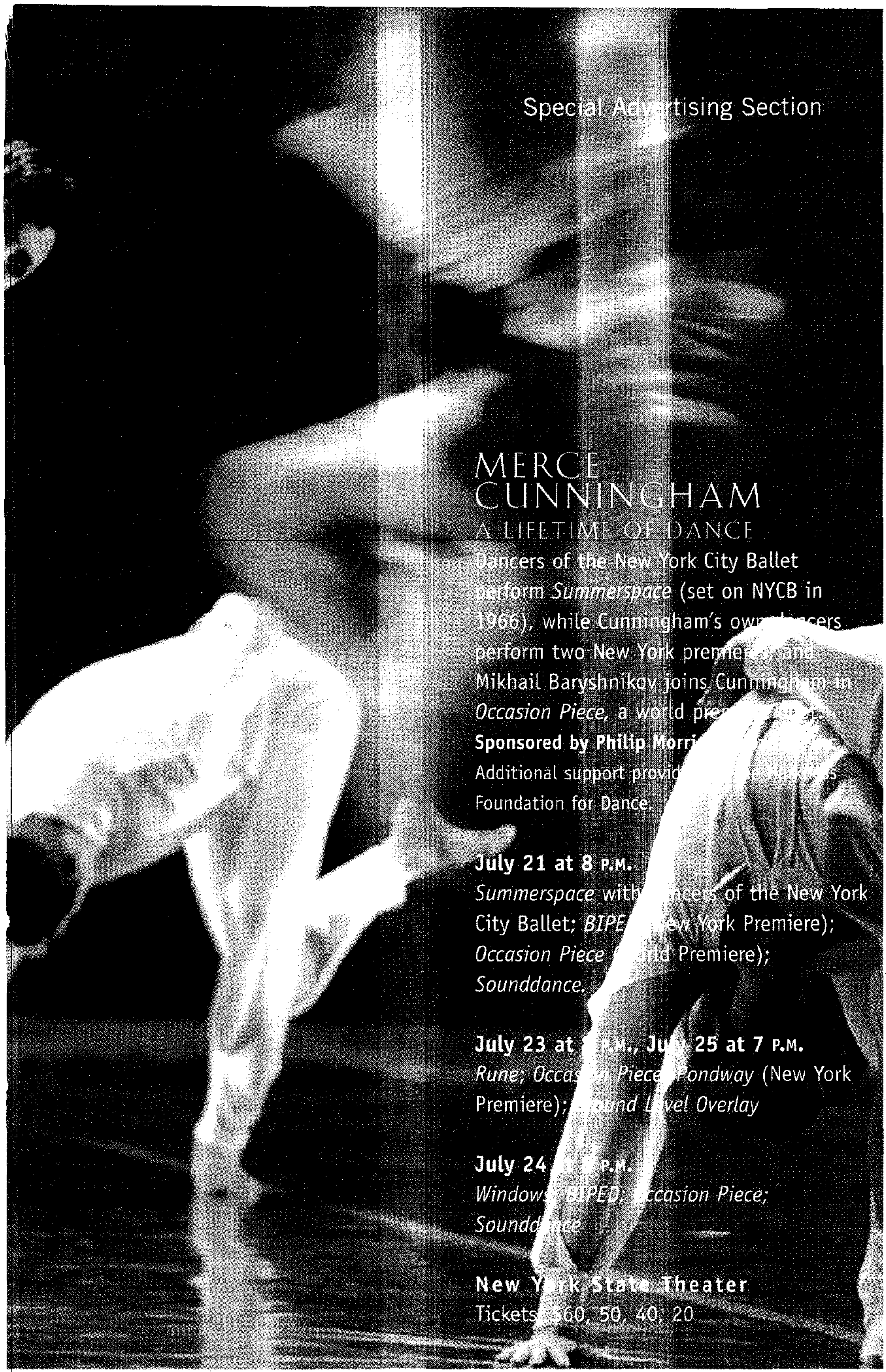

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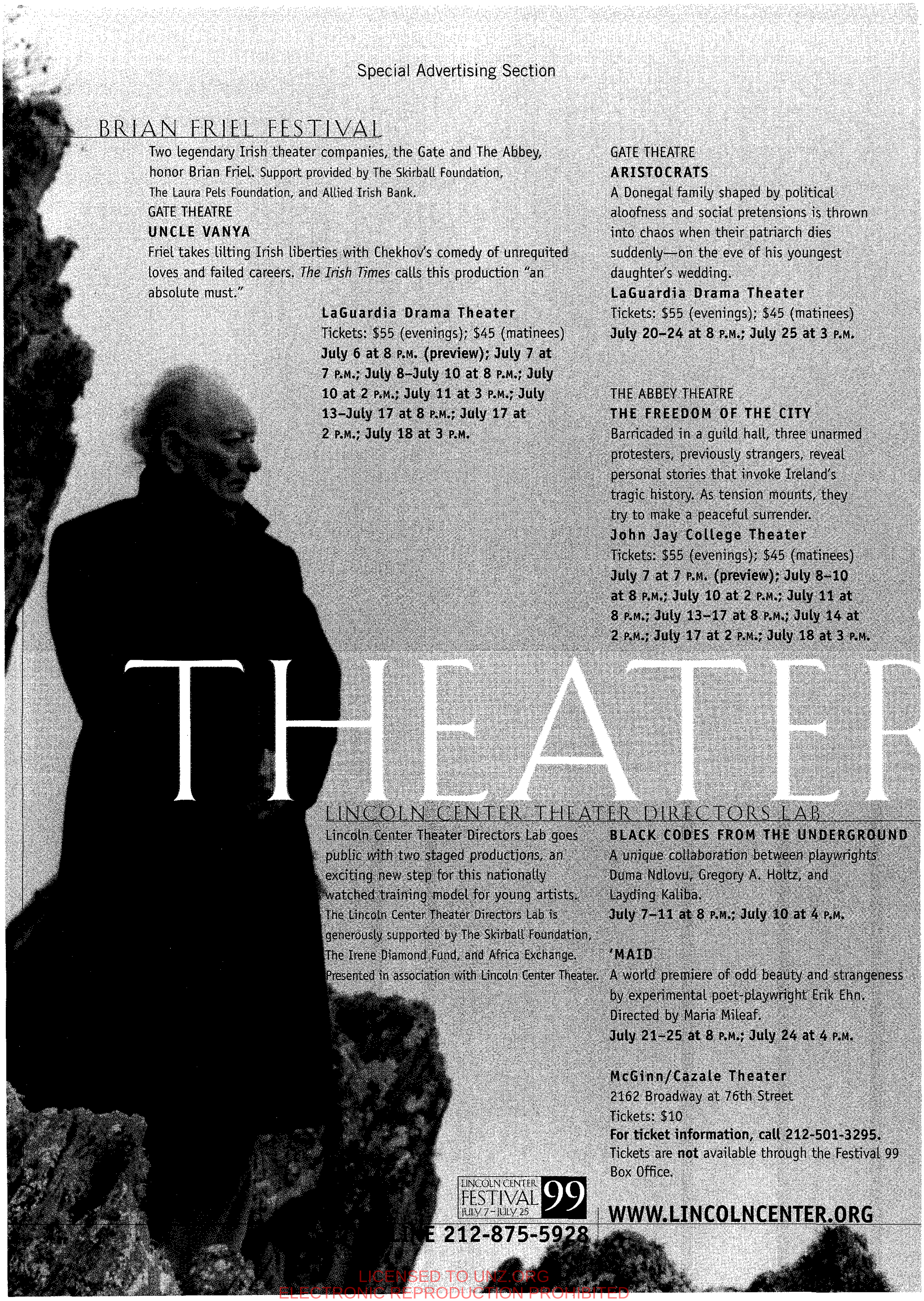

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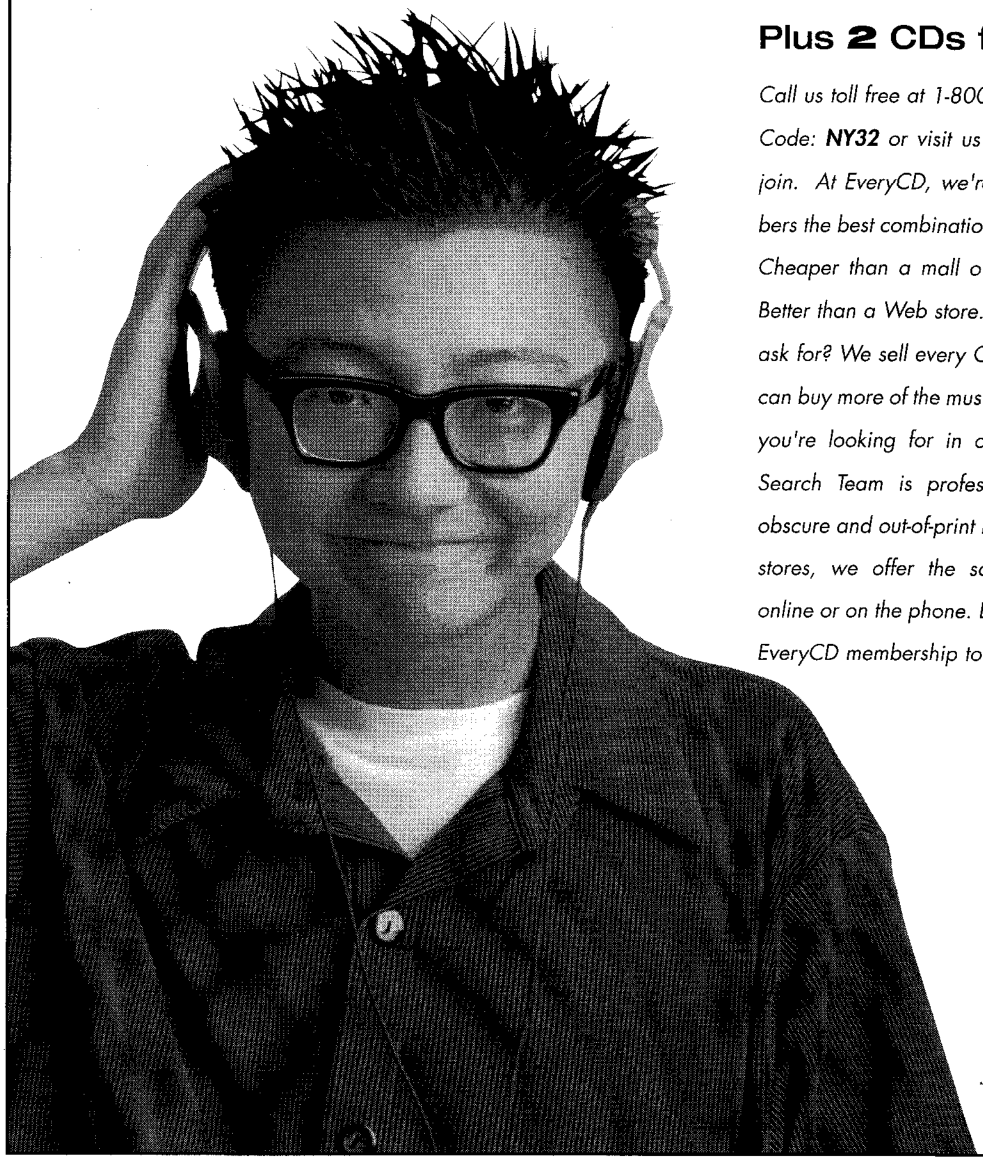

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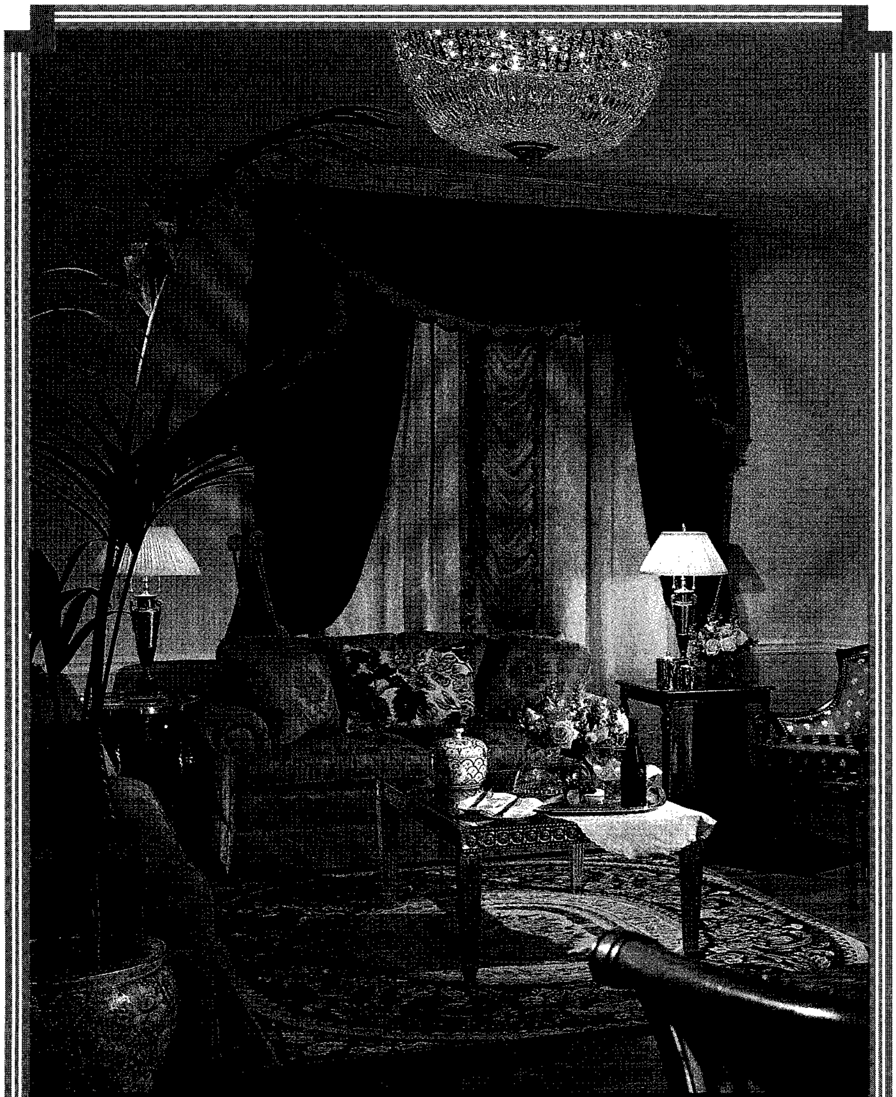

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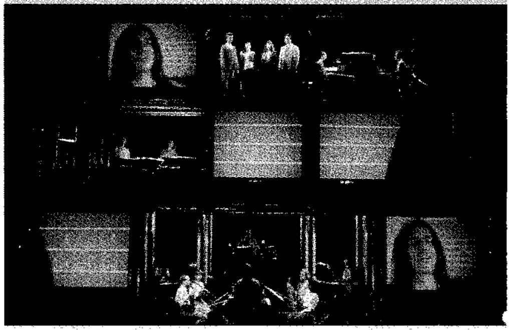

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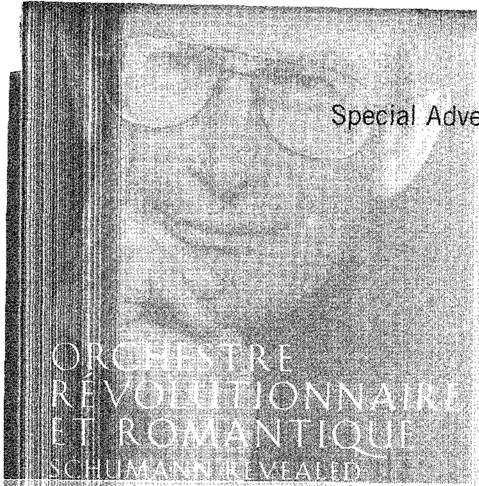

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Fantasy for Piano and Orchestra
Symphony No. 4 (1851 version)

July 22 at 8 P.M.
Symphony No. 3
Cello concerto
Symphony No. 2

July 23 at 8 P.M.
Symphony No. 1; Piano Concerto
Symphony No. 4 (1841 version)

Alice Tully Hall Tickets: $45

July 25 at 7 P.M.
Scenes from Goethe's Faust
Monteverdi Choir, American Boychoir, and soloists

Avery Fisher Hall Tickets: $47, 35, 25

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July 9	**North Jersey Philharmonic Glee Club**
July 10	**Nancey Jackson** **The Thrashing Wonders**
July 13	**The Broadway Gospel Choir**
July 14	**Christ Church Choir** **Joy Unlimited Mass Choir**
July 15	***Crossroads Tabernacle*** **Dickson Guillaume** and the **New York Haitian Interdenominational Mass Choir**
July 16	**The New York Christian Life Centre Singers and Band**

New York Society For Ethical Culture
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July 7 at 8 P.M.
Beethoven: Piano Concerto No. 1
Tchaikovsky: Serenade for Strings

July 10 at 8 P.M.
Beethoven: Piano Concerto No. 2
Dvořák: Symphony No. 8

July 12 at 8 P.M.
Beethoven: Piano Concerto No. 3
Tchaikovsky: Symphony No. 2

July 14 at 8 P.M.
Beethoven: Piano Concerto No. 4
Reger: Op. 132 Variations and Fugue on a Theme By Mozart

July 15 at 8 P.M.
Beethoven: Piano Concerto No. 5
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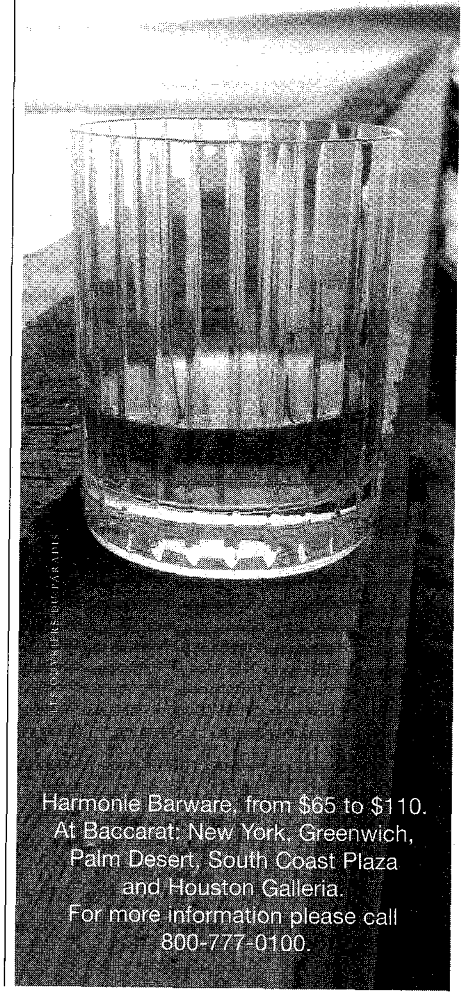

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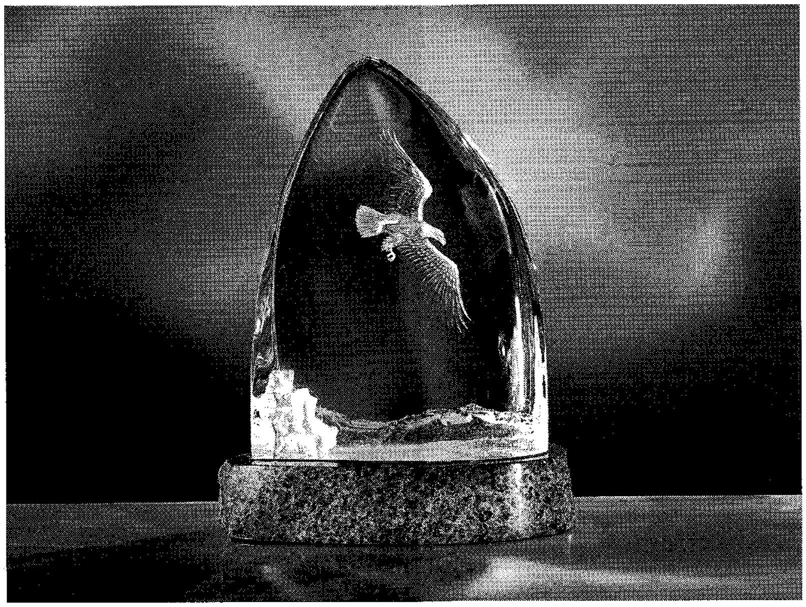

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Episode 2: Pursuing the Dream
July 8 at 7 P.M., July 16, 23 at 8:30 P.M.

Episode 3: Making Love to A Ghost
July 9 at 4 P.M., July 17, 24 at 2 P.M.

Episode 4: Resurrection
July 9 at 8:30 P.M., July 17, 24 at 7 P.M.

Episode 5: War Against the Bandits
July 10, 18, 25 at 2 P.M.

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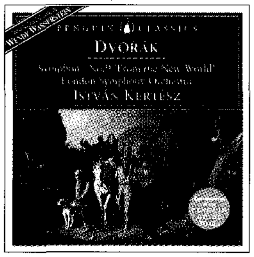
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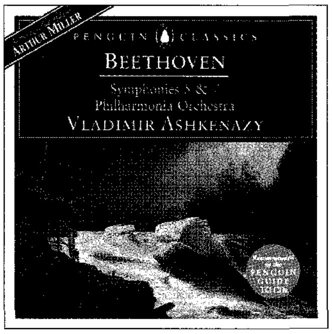
It was February 1949, the afternoon before the first performance of *Death Of A Salesman* at the Walnut Theatre in Philadelphia. By this time the cast had nothing to do but play cards, roam around and keep from jinxing what all believed was going to be a great hit, by even mentioning their optimistic convictions.

ARTHUR MILLER

ON

BEETHOVEN



BEETHOVEN: Symphony Nos. 5 & 7
Philharmonia Orchestra
Vladimir Ashkenazy
Featuring Original Essay by Arthur Miller
Author of *Death Of A Salesman*,
The Crucible and *Timebends: A Life*

Lee J. Cobb, the first and possibly the most heroic Willy, was a fundamentally depressed-cheerful man. Such was his underlying sadness, that when he chuckled he could bring tears to your eyes. In rehearsals he had created a massive, Lear-like figure. But the very promise of his performances was frightening; there had already been a few rehearsals when toward the play's end he seemed to lose his focus and indulged in some aimless roaring. And now, with only a few hours before the first audience - those nasty strangers - would come strolling into the theatre, Lee's eyes showed his suppressed fears. He had said once, before we had begun rehearsing an age ago, that this play would become a landmark in theatre; now he seemed more uncertain than confident that he could stand up to its challenge as he had defined it earlier.

Elia Kazan, the director, was an old friend of Lee's from the Group Theatre of which both had been members back in the Thirties and early Forties before its disbandment. Kazan had caught the scent of Lee's fears which were exacerbated by rumors that this was an extraordinary play, and therefore a stationary target for the ironists and haters. People were coming in from New York to be present at what was being bruited about as an historic occasion - among them, as I recall, the composer Kurt Weill and Lotte Lenya and a lot more glittering theatre and movie folk.

If I remember correctly, the concert hall was across the street from the theatre. Kazan decided we should go over and hear Beethoven's Seventh and relax. (After half a century I can't be sure but I believe Bruno Walter was the conductor.) In the box, I recall being struck for the first time by the series of near-climaxes, each reigned in until the final ingathering explosion. I leaned forward and whispered into Lee's ear, *"This is the last ten minutes."* He understood; as Willy he had often yielded to the temptation of blowing all his forces well before his final climaxes. He was a terribly edgy horse, and sometimes, because he wanted every moment to count, nearly gave way to his emotions rather than the controlled arc of the play. Staring down at the orchestra he nodded agreement, newly aware, I thought, of Beethoven's refusal of climaxes and his returning to them again and again until, in full possession of all his themes he smashed through the roof and into the heavens. Whether or not it was the Seventh that inspired him, I have always believed it helped Lee to adhere to the play's trajectory on opening night, and he never strayed from it again.

- Arthur Miller

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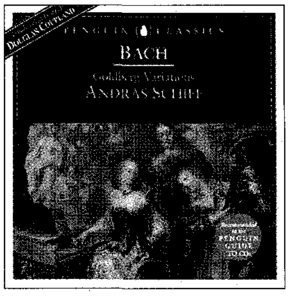
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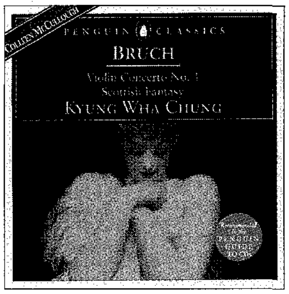
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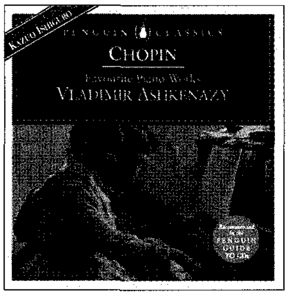
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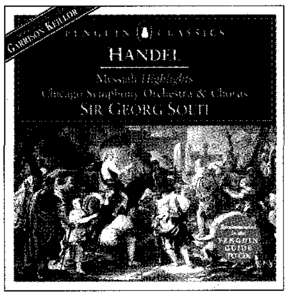
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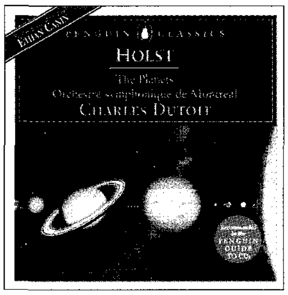
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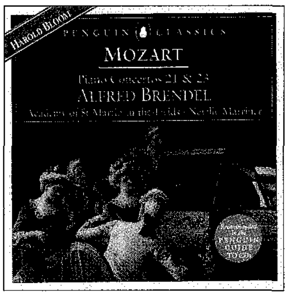
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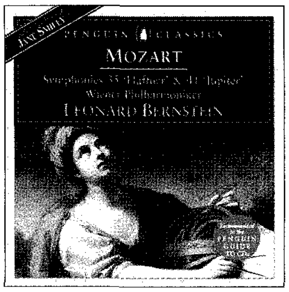
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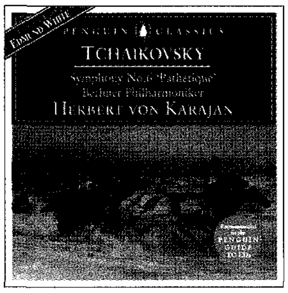
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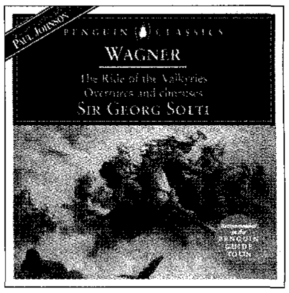
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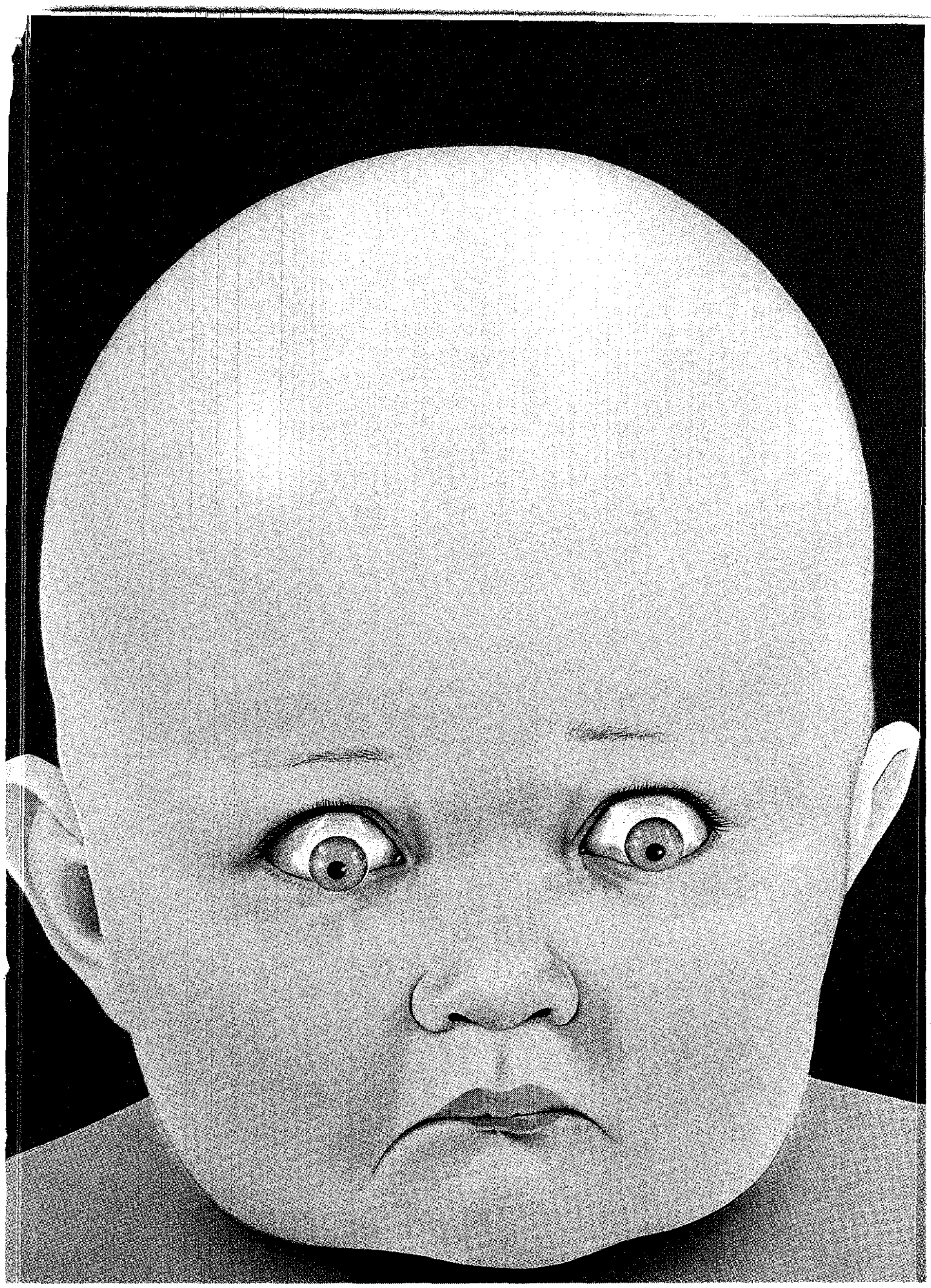

DETAIL FROM SEAN MELLYN'S "TAKE US TO YOUR LEADER"/ANNA KUSTERA GALLERY

I CAN SPEAK!™

GEORGE SAUNDERS

Mrs. Ruth Faniglia
210 Lester Street
Rochester, N.Y. 14623

DEAR MRS. FANIGLIA,

We were very sorry to receive your letter of 23 Feb., which accompanied the I CAN SPEAK!™ you returned, much to our disappointment. We here at KidLuv believe that the I CAN SPEAK!™ is an innovative and essential educational tool that, used with proper parental guidance, offers a rare early-development opportunity for babies and toddlers alike. And so I thought I would take some of my personal time (I am on lunch) and try to address the questions you raised in your letter, which is here in front of me on my (cluttered!) desk.

First, may I be so bold as to suggest that your disappointment may stem from your own, perhaps unreasonable, expectations? Because in your letter, what you indicated, when I read it, was that you think and/or thought that somehow the product can read your baby's mind? Our product cannot read your baby's mind, Mrs. Faniglia. No one can read a baby's mind, at least not yet. Although believe me, we are probably working on it! All the I CAN SPEAK!™ can do, however, is respond to aural patterns in a way that makes baby seem older. Say baby sees a peach. If you or Mr. Faniglia (I hope I do not presume) were to loudly say something like "What a delicious peach!" the I CAN SPEAK!™, hearing this, through that little slotted hole near the neck, would respond by saying something like "I LIKE PEACH." Or "I WANT PEACH." Or, if you had chosen the ICS2000 (you chose the ICS1900, which is fine, perfectly good for most babies), the I CAN SPEAK!™ might even respond by saying something like "FRUIT, ISN'T THAT ONE OF THE MAJOR FOOD GROUPS?" Which would be pretty good, for a six-month-old like Derek, your son, don't you think?

But here I must reiterate: That would not in reality be Derek speaking. Derek would not in reality know that a peach is fruit, or that fruit is a major food group. The I CAN SPEAK!™ knows, however, and, from its position on Derek's face, it will give the illusion that Derek knows, by giving the illusion that Derek is speaking out of the twin moving SimuLips. But that is it. That is all we claim.

Furthermore, in your letter, Mrs. Faniglia, you state that the I CAN SPEAK!™ "mask" (your terminology) takes on a "stressed-out look when talking that is not what a real baby's talking face appears like but is more like some nervous middle-aged woman." Well, maybe that is so, but, with all due respect, you try it! You try making a latex face look and talk and move like the real face of an actual live baby! Inside are over 5000 separate circuits and 390 moving parts. And as far as looking like a middle-aged woman, we beg to differ: we do not feel that a middle-aged stressed-out woman has (1) no hair on head and (2) chubby cheeks and (3) fine downy facial hair. The ICS1900 unit is definitely the face of a baby, Mrs. Faniglia. We took over twenty-five hundred photos of different babies and using a computer combined them to make this face, this face we call Male Composite 37 or, affectionately, Little Roger. But what you possibly seem to

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– *Trapper John, M.D.*

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Morningstar proprietary ratings reflect historical risk-adjusted performance for the periods ended March 31, 1999. Ratings are calculated from the Fund's 3-, 5- and 10-year average annual total returns (when applicable) in excess of 90-day Treasury-bill returns (with appropriate fee adjustments) and a risk factor that reflects fund performance below 90-day T-bill returns. These ratings are subject to change each month. The top 10% of the funds in an investment category receive 5 stars, the next 22.5% receive 4 stars, the next 35% receive 3 stars, the next 22.5% receive 2 stars and the bottom 10% receive 1 star. American Opportunities Fund Class B received 5 stars for 10 years (of 743 domestic equity funds), and 4 stars for 5 years (of 1,810 funds) and 3 years (of 2,947 funds). Ratings are for Class B shares only; other share class ratings may vary. Past performance is no guarantee of future results.

On July 28, 1997, the Fund introduced multiple classes of shares featuring various sales charge structures and ongoing fees. Most existing shares in the Fund were designated Class B shares, which are subject to a contingent deferred sales charge (CDSC) that starts at 5.00% and declines to zero after six years and applies only upon the sale of Fund shares.

* Average annual total returns reflect the actual performance of the Fund without taking sales charges into account. SEC standardized returns reflect the Fund's contingent deferred sales charge (Class B shares), which applies only if the shares are sold within six years of purchase.

† The Standard & Poor's 500 Composite Stock Price Index is an unmanaged index of 500 common stocks and is a generally accepted measure of stock market performance. The S&P 500 had average annual total returns of +18.47%, +26.23% and +18.96% for the 1, 5 and 10 years ended March 31, 1999, respectively.

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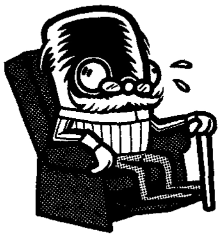
be unhappy about is that Little Roger's face is not Derek's face? To be frank, Mrs. Faniglia, many of you, our customers, have found it disconcerting that their baby looks different with the I CAN SPEAK!™ on. Which we find so surprising. Did you, we often wonder, not look at the cover of the box? On that cover the ICS1900 is very plainly shown, situated on a sort of rack, looking facewise like Little Roger, albeit Little Roger is a bit crumpled and has a forehead furrow of sorts.



But this is why we came up with the ICS2100. With the ICS2100, your baby looks just like your baby. And, because we do not want anyone to be unhappy with us, we would like to give you a complimentary ICS2100 upgrade! We would like to come to your house on Lester Street and make a personalized plaster cast of Derek's real, actual face! And soon, via FedEx, here will come Derek's face in a box, and when you slip that ICS2100 over Derek's head and Velcro the Velcro, he will look so very much like himself! Plus we have another free surprise, which is that, while at your house, we will tape his actual voice and use it to make our phrases, the phrases Derek will subsequently say. So not only will he look like himself, he will sound like himself, as he crawls around your house appearing to speak!

Plus we will throw in several other personalizing options. Say you call Derek "Lovemeister." (I am using this example from my own personal home, as my wife, Ann, and I call our son Billy "Lovemeister," because he is so sweet.) With the ICS2100, you might choose to have Derek say, upon crawling into a room, "HERE COMES THE LOVEMEISTER!" or "STOP TALKING DIRTY, THE LOVEMEISTER HAS ARRIVED!" How we do this is, laser beams coming out of the earlobes, which sense the doorframe. So the I CAN SPEAK!™ knows it has just entered a room, from its position on Derek's head! And also you will have over one hundred Discretionary Phrases to more highly personalize Derek. For instance, you might choose to have him say, on his birthday, "MOMMY AND DADDY, REMEMBER THAT TIME YOU CONCEIVED ME IN ARUBA?" Although probably you did not in fact conceive Derek in Aruba. That we do not know. (Our research is not that extensive!) Or say your dog comes up and gives Derek a lick? You could make Derek say (if your dog's name is Queenie), "QUEENIE, GIVE IT A REST!" Which, you know what? It makes you love him more. Because suddenly he is articulate. Suddenly he is not just sitting there going glub glub glub while examining a piece of his own feces on his own thumb, which is something we recently found Billy doing! Sometimes we have felt that our childless friends think badly of us for having a kid who just goes glub glub glub in the corner while looking at his feces on his thumb. But now when childless friends are over, what we have found, my wife, Ann, and I, is that it's great to have your kid say something witty and self-possessed years before he or she would actually in reality be able to say something witty or self-possessed. The bottom line is that it's just *fun* when you and your childless friends are playing cards, and your baby suddenly blurts out (in his *very own probable future voice*), "IT IS LIKELY THAT WE STILL DON'T FULLY UNDERSTAND THE IMPORT OF ALL OF EINSTEIN'S FINDINGS!"

Here I must admit that we have several times seen a sort of softening in the eyes of our resolute childless friends, as if they, too, would suddenly like to have a baby.

And as far as Derek flinching whenever that voice issues forth from him? When that speaker near his mouth sort of buzzes his lips? May I say this is not unusual? What I suggest? Try putting the ICS on Derek for a short time at first, maybe ten minutes a day, then gradually building up his Wearing Time. That is what we did. And it worked super. Now Billy wears his even while sleeping. In fact, if we forget to put it back on after his bath, he pitches a fit. Kind of begs for it! He starts to say, you know, "Mak! Mak!" Which we think is his word for mask. And when we put the mask on and Velcro the Velcro, he says, or rather it says, "GUTEN MORGEN, PAPA!" because we are trying to teach him German, and have installed the German Learning module in our ICS2100. Or for example, if his pants are not yet on, he'll say, "HOW ABOUT SLAPPING ON MY ROMPERS SO I CAN GET ON WITH MY DAY!" (I wrote that one.)

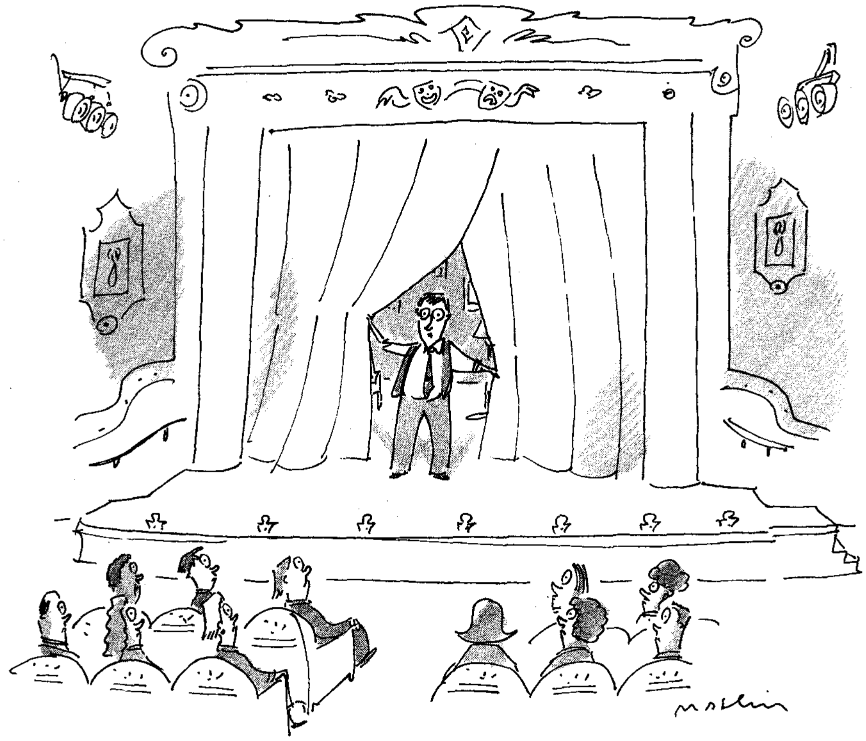
My point is, with the ICS2100 Billy is much, much cleverer than he ever was with the ICS1900. He has recently learned, for example, that if he spills a little milk on his chin, his SimuLips will issue a MOO sound. Which he really seems to get a kick out of! I'll be in the living room doing a little evening paperwork and from the kitchen I'll hear, you know, "MOO! MOO! MOO!" And I'll rush in, and there'll be this sort of lake of milk on the floor. And there'll be Billy, pouring milk on his chin until I yank the milk away, at which point he bellows, "DON'T FENCE ME IN." (Ann's contribution—she was raised in Wyoming!)

I, for one, Mrs. Faniglia, do not believe that any baby wants to sit around all day going glub glub glub. My feeling is that a baby, sitting in its diaper, looking around at the world, thinks to itself, albeit in some crude nonverbal way, What the heck is wrong with me, why am I the only one going glub glub glub while all these other folks are talking in whole complete sentences? And hence, possibly, lifelong psychological damage may result. Now, am I saying that your Derek runs the risk of feeling bad about himself as a grownup because as a baby he felt he didn't know how to talk right? No, it is not for me to say that, Mrs. Faniglia, I am only in Sales. But I will say that I am certainly not taking any chances with our Billy. My belief is that when Billy hears a competent, intelligent voice issuing from the area near his mouth, he feels excellent about himself. And I feel excellent about him. Not that I didn't feel excellent about him before. But now we can actually have a sort of conversation! And also—and most importantly—when that voice issues from his SimuLips he learns something invaluable; namely, that when he finally does begin speaking, he will be speaking via using his mouth.

Now, Mrs. Faniglia, you may be thinking, Hold on a sec, of course this guy loves his I CAN SPEAK!™ He probably gets his for free! But not so, Mrs. Faniglia, I get mine for two grand, just like you. We get no discounts, so much in demand is the I CAN SPEAK!™, and in addition we are strongly encouraged by our management to purchase and use the I CAN SPEAK!™ at home, on our own kids. (Or even, in one case, on an elderly senile mom! Suffice it to say that, though she looks sort of funny with the Little Roger head on her somewhat frail frame, the family takes great comfort in hearing all the witty things she has to say. Just like her old self!) Not that I wouldn't use it otherwise. Believe me, I would. Since we upgraded to the ICS2100, things have been great, Billy looks almost identical to himself, and is not nearly so, you know, boring as before, when we had the ICS1900, which (frankly) says some rather predictable things, which I expect is partly why you were so unhappy with it, Mrs. Faniglia, you seem like a very intelligent woman. When people come over now, sometimes we just gather around Billy and wait for his next howler, and last weekend my supervisor, Mr. Ted Ames, stopped by (a super guy, he has really given me support, please let him know if you've found this letter at all helpful) and boy did we all crack up laughing when Billy began rubbing his face very rapidly across the carpet in order to make his ICS2100 shout, "FRICTION IS A COMMON AND USEFUL SOURCE OF HEAT!"

Mrs. Faniglia, it is nearing the end of my lunch, and so I must wrap this up, but I hope I have been of service. On a personal note, I did not have the greatest of pasts when I came here, having been in a few scrapes and even rehab situations, but now, wow, the commissions roll in, and I have made a nice life for me and Ann and Billy. Not that the possible loss of my commission is the reason for my concern. Please do not think so. While it is true that, if you decline my upgrade offer and persist in your desire to return your ICS1900, my commission must be refunded, by me, to Mr. Ames, it is no big deal, I have certainly refunded commissions to Mr. Ames before, especially lately. I don't quite know what I'm doing wrong. But that is not your concern, Mrs. Faniglia. Your concern is Derek. My real reason for writing this letter, on my lunch break, is that, hard as we all work at KidLuv to provide innovative and essential development tools for families like yours, Mrs. Faniglia, it is always sort of a heartbreak when our products are misapprehended. Please do accept our offer of a free ICS2100 upgrade. We at KidLuv really love what kids are, Mrs. Faniglia, which is why we want them to become something better as soon as possible! Baby's early years are so precious, and must not be wasted, as we are finding out, as our Billy grows and grows, learning new skills every day.

Sincerely yours,
Rick Sminks
Product Service Representative
KidLuv, Inc. ♦



"Is there a doctor of literature in the house?"

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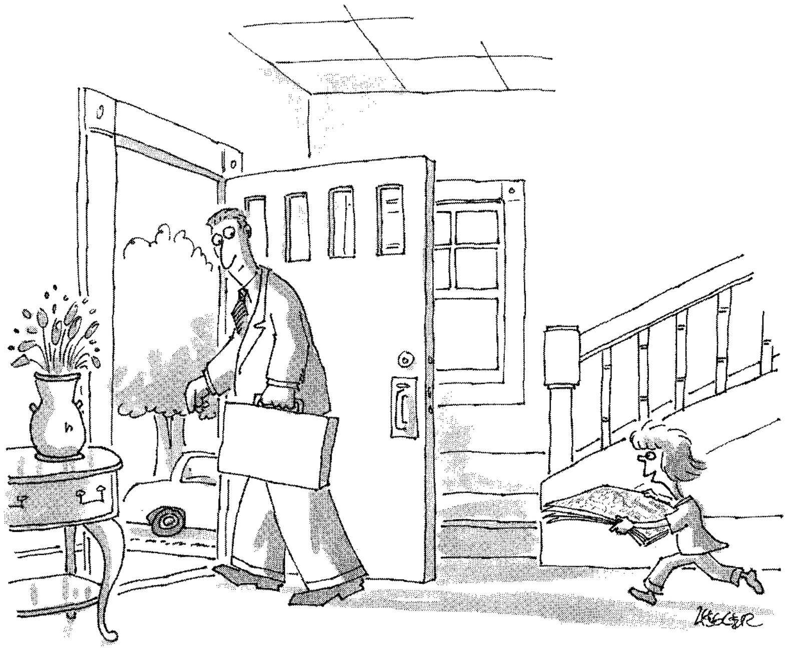

"Dad, wait! I've printed a color portfolio of my refrigerator art so that you'll have something to entertain you at work."

Looking to replace that old, sluggish color printer? You might be surprised how far the technology has come since the last time you were in the market for one. Combining quick, high-resolution color with fast, crisp black text and a remarkably intelligent ink tank system, the new BJC-6000 Color Bubble Jet™ printer from Canon is an excellent representative of state-of-the-art technology today.

Its speed is the first thing you'll notice. The BJC-6000 delivers beautiful, full-color documents at the astonishing rate of approximately five ppm (pages-per-minute). Laser-quality black text is even faster at approximately eight ppm. Canon engineers employed a clever dual-cartridge design incorporating dozens of miniscule ink nozzles on two separate cartridges that move simultaneously. The resulting speed seems to prove that two heads are indeed better than one.

Then there's the BJC-6000's impressive print quality. For greater definition, the BJC-6000 can lay down up to 1440 x 720 dots-per-inch to produce sharp text and true-to-life color. The printer also features Canon's proprietary Drop Modulation Technology™, an advancement in Bubble Jet design, allowing the print head to create regular ink droplets and those one-third the size on the same print line without compromising speed. The result is smoother lines, reduced graininess, and greater sharpness and detail. For very serious projects, the BJC-6000 can be equipped with Photo Inks and specialty paper to produce photo-quality printing that's virtually indistinguishable from traditional photo prints.

At around $249, the BJC-6000 is competitively priced. But Canon has found an interesting way to reduce the cost of future ink replacement, making the initial investment even more attractive. Color ink jet printers typically store their color inks in a single cartridge, creating a problem when one color runs out: you have to replace all of them. The Canon Think Tank System™ solves this dilemma by storing inks in individually replaceable tanks for each color (cyan, magenta, yellow, and black). When one color runs out, it can be replaced without replacing the entire cartridge—eliminating ink waste and saving money. In addition, ink levels are monitored by an advanced optical sensor that can "see" when ink levels are low, giving you a pop-up, on-screen reminder before the tank runs dry. Seems we've come a long way since the first ink jet printers.

A pioneer in optics and lenses, imaging, and Bubble Jet printing, Canon is the world's largest printer manufacturer with more than $24 billion in worldwide sales in 1998. Their new BJC-6000 is now available throughout the country at major retailers, computer dealers, and superstores. For more information about this or other products, contact Canon at 1-800-OK-CANON, or visit the company's Web site at **www.ccsi.canon.com.**

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Got a few seconds?

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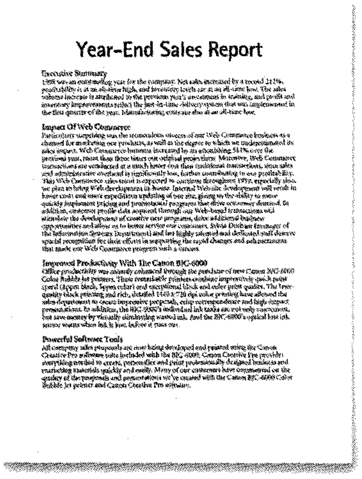
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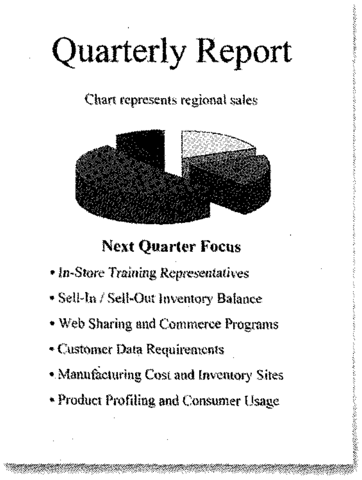
Quarterly Report

Chart represents regional sales

Next Quarter Focus

- *In-Store Training Representatives*
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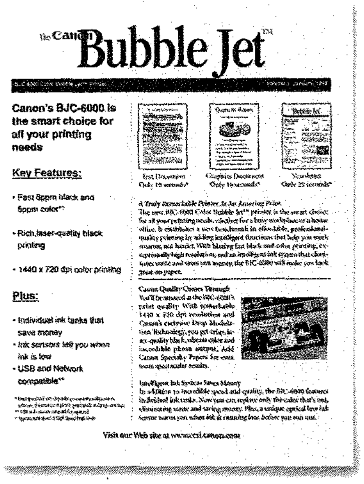
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JUAN DOWNEY, "HARD TIMES AND CULTURE, PART I" (1990)/EAI

ASSET

DAVID FOSTER WALLACE

BENTON RIDGE, OH, 06/97

“It's the arm. You wouldn't think of it as a asset like that would you. But it's the arm. You want to see it? You won't get disgusted? Well here it is. Here's the arm. This is why I go by the name Johnny One-Arm. I made it up, not anybody being, like, hard-hearted—me. I see how you're trying to be polite and not look at it. Go ahead and look though. It don't bother me. Inside my head I don't call it the arm I call it the Asset. How all would you describe it? Go on. You think it'll hurt my feelings? You want to hear me describe it? It looks like a arm that changed its mind early on in the game when it was in Mama's stomach with the rest of me. It's more like a itty tiny little flipper, it's little and wet-looking and darker than the rest of me is. It looks wet even when it's dry. It's not a pretty sight at all. I usually keep it in the sleeve until it's time to haul it out and use it for the Asset. Notice the shoulder's normal, it's just like the other shoulder. It's just the arm. It'll only go down to like the titty-nipple of my chest here, see? It's a little sucker. It ain't pretty. It moves fine, I can move it around fine. If you look close here at the end there's these little majiggers you can tell started out wanting to be fingers but didn't form. When I was in her stomach. The other arm—see? It's a normal arm, a little muscly on account of using it all the time. It's normal and long and the right color, that's the arm I show all the time, most times I keep the other sleeve pinned up so it don't look to be even anything like a arm in there at all. It's strong though. The arm is. It's hard on the eyes but it's strong, sometimes I'll try and get them to arm wrestle it to see how strong it is. It's a strong little flippery sucker. If they think they can stand to touch it. I always say if they don't think they can stand touching it why that's O.K., it don't hurt my feelings. You want to touch it?”

Q.

“That's all right. That is all right.”

Q.

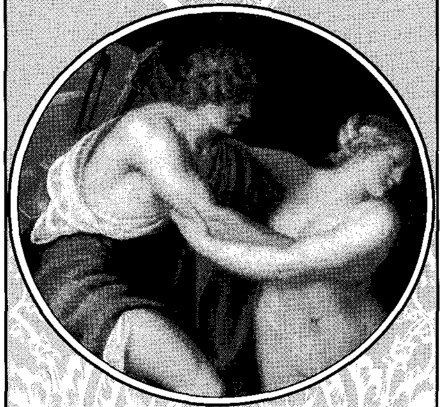
“What it is is—well first there's always some girls around. You know

AN EQUAL MUSIC

A NOVEL

VIKRAM SETH

AUTHOR OF *A SUITABLE BOY*



“Vikram Seth's accomplishment in bringing not only these characters so fully to life, but the rich ambience of the music as well—so difficult to render in words—is something of a miracle.”
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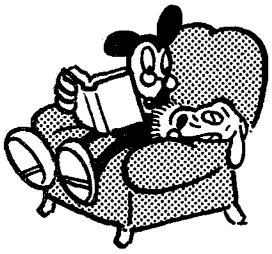
what I mean? At the foundry there, at the Lanes. There's a tavern right down by the bus stop there. Jackpot—that's my best friend—Jackpot and Kenny Kirk—Kenny Kirk's his cousin, Jackpot's, that are both over me at the foundry cause I finished school and didn't get in the union till after—they're real good-looking and normal-looking and Good With The Ladies if you know what I mean, and there's always girls hanging back around. Like in a group, a bunch or group of all of us, we'll all just hang back, drink some beers. Jackpot and Kenny're always going with one of them or the other and then the ones they're going with got friends. You know. A whole, say, group of us there. You follow the picture here? And I'll start hanging back with this one or that one, and after a while the first stage is I'll start in to telling them how I got the name Johnny One-Arm and about the arm. That's a stage of the thing. Of getting some pussy using the Asset. I'll describe the arm while it's still up in the sleeve and make it sound like just about the ugliest thing you ever did see. They'll get this look on their face like Oh You Poor Little Fella You're Being Too Hard On Yourself You Shouldn't Be Shameful Of The Arm. So on. How I'm such a nice young fella and it breaks their heart to see me talk about my own part of me that way especially since it weren't any fault of mine to get born with the arm. At which time when they start with that stage of it the next stage is I ask them do they want to see it. I say how I'm shameful of the arm but somehow I trust them and they seem real nice and if they want I'll unpin the sleeve and let the arm out and let them look at the arm if they think they could stand it. I'll go on about the arm until they can't hardly stand to hear no more about it. Sometimes it's a ex of Jackpot's that's the one that starts hanging back with me down at Frame Eleven over to the Lanes and saying how I'm such a good listener and sensitive not like Jackpot or Kenny and she can't believe there's any way the arm's as bad as I'm making out and like that. Or we'll be hanging back at her place in the kitchenette or some such and I'll go It's So Hot I Feel Like Taking My Shirt Off But I Don't Want To On Account Of I'm Shameful Of The Arm. Like that. There's numerous, like, stages. I never out loud call it the Asset believe you me. Go on and touch it whenever you get a mind to. One of the stages is I know after some time I really am starting to come off creepy to the girl, I can tell, cause all I can talk about is the arm and how wet and flippery it is but how it's strong but how I'd just about up and die if a girl as nice and pretty and perfect as I think she is saw it and got disgusted, and I can tell all the talk starts creeping them up inside and they start to secretly think I'm kind of a loser but they can't back out on me cause after all here they been all this time saying all this nice shit about what a sensitive young fella I am and how I shouldn't be shameful and there's no way the arm can be that bad. In this stage it's like they're committed into a corner and if they quit hanging back with me now why they know I can go It Was Because Of The Arm."



Q.

"Usually long about two weeks, like that. The next is your critical-type stage where I show them the arm. I wait till it's just her and me alone someplace and I haul the sucker out. I make it seem like they talked me into it and now I trust them and they're who I finally feel like I can let it out of the sleeve and show it. And I show it to her just like I just did you. There's some additional things too I can do with it that look even worse, make it look—see that? See this right here? It's cause there ain't even really a elbow bone, it's just a—"

Q.

"Or some of your ointments or Vaseline-type jelly on it to make it look even wetter and shinier. The arm's not a pretty sight at all when I up and haul it out on them I'm telling you right now. It just about makes them puke, the sight of it the way I get it. Oh and a couple run out, some skedoodle right out the door. But your majority? Your majority of them'll swallow hard a time or two and go Oh It's It's It's Not Too Bad At All but they're looking over all away and try and not look at my face which I've got this totally shy and scared and trusting face on at the time like this one thing I can do where I can make my lip even tremble a little. Ee? Ee anh? And ever time sooner or later within inside, like, five minutes of it they'll up and start crying. They're in way over their head, see. They're, like, committed into a corner of saying how it can't be that ugly and I shouldn't be shameful and then they see it and I see to it it is ugly, ugly ugly ugly and now what do they do? Pretend? Shit girl most of these girls around here think Elvis is alive someplace. These are not girl wonders of the brain. It breaks them down ever time. They get even worse if I ask them Oh Golly What's Wrong, how come they're crying, Is It The Arm and they have to say It Ain't The Arm, they have to, they have to try and pretend it ain't the arm that it's how they feel so sad for me being so shameful of something that ain't a big deal at all they have to say. Oftentimes with their face in their hands and crying. Your climactic stage then is then I up and come over to where she's at and sit down and now I'm the one that's comforting them. A, like, factor here I found out the hard way is when I go in to hold them and comfort them I hold them with the good side. I don't give them no more of the Asset. The Asset's wrapped back up safe out of sight in the sleeve now. They're broke down crying and I'm the one holding them with the good arm and go It's O.K. Don't Cry Don't Be Sad Being Able To Trust You Not To Get Disgusted By The Arm Means So Very Very Much To Me Don't You See You Have Set Me Free Of Being Shameful Of The Arm Thank You Thank You and so on while they put their face in my neck and just cry and cry. Sometimes they get me crying too. You following all this?"

Q. . . .

"More pussy than a toilet seat, man. I shit you not. Go on and ask Jackpot and Kenny if you want about it. Kenny Kirk's the one named it the Asset. You go on." ♦

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THE TOUGHEST INDIAN IN THE WORLD

SHERMAN ALEXIE

BEING a Spokane Indian, I only pick up Indian hitchhikers. I learned this particular ceremony from my father, a Coeur d'Alêne, who always stopped for those twentieth-century aboriginal nomads who refused to believe the salmon were gone. I don't know what they believed in exactly, but they wore hope like a bright shirt. My father never taught me about hope. From an early age, I was told that our salmon would never come back, and though such lessons may seem cruel, I learned to cover my heart in a crowd of white people.

"They'll kill you if they get the chance," my father said. "Love you or hate you, white people will shoot you in the heart. Even after all these years, they'll still smell the salmon on you, the dead salmon, and that will make white people dangerous."

All of us, Indian and white, are haunted by salmon.

When I was a boy, I leaned over the edge of one dam or another—perhaps Long Lake or Little Falls or the great gray dragon known as the Grand Coulee—and watched the ghosts of salmon rise from the water to the sky and become constellations. Believe me, for most Indians stars are nothing more than white tombstones scattered across a dark graveyard.

But the Indian hitchhikers my father picked up refused to admit the existence of sky, let alone the possibility that salmon might be stars. They were common people who believed only in the thumb and the foot. My father envied those simple Indian hitchhikers. He wanted to change their minds about salmon; he wanted to break open their hearts and see the future in their blood, because he loved them.

Driving along one highway or another, my father would point out a hitchhiker standing beside the road a mile or two in the distance.

"Indian," he would say, and he was never wrong, though I could never tell if the distant figure was male or female, let alone Indian or not.

If that distant figure happened to be white, my father would drive by without

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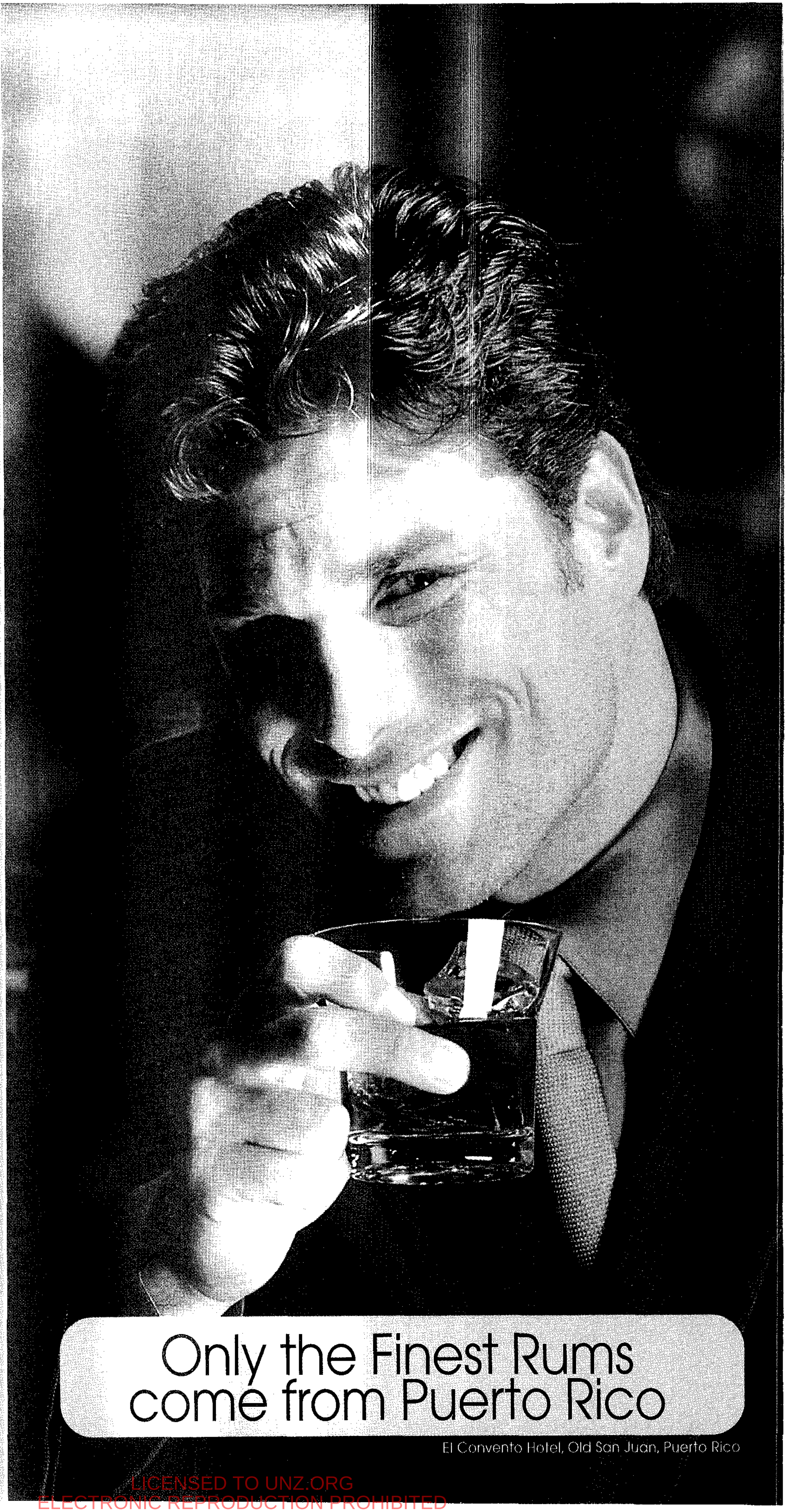
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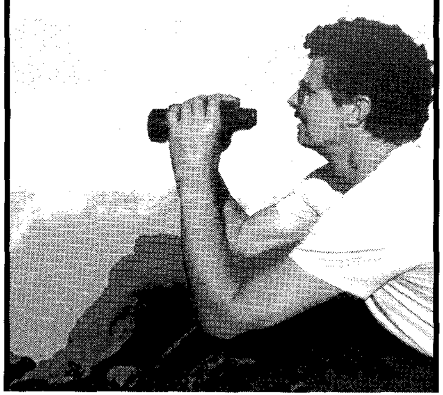

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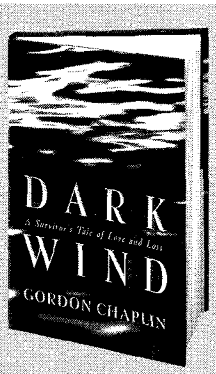

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comment. That was how I learned to be silent in the presence of white people. The silence is not about hate or pain or fear. Indians just like to believe that white people will vanish, perhaps explode into smoke, if they are ignored enough times. Perhaps a thousand white families are still waiting for their sons and daughters to return home, and can't recognize them when they float back as morning fog.

"Indian," my father would say again as we approached one of those dream-filled hitchhikers. Hell, those hitchhikers' faces grew red and puffy with the weight of their dreams.

"We better stop," my mother would say from the passenger seat. She was one of those Spokane women who always wore a purple bandanna tied tightly around their heads. These days, her bandanna is usually red. There are reasons, motives, traditions behind the choice of color, but my mother keeps them secret.

"Make room," my father would say to my siblings and me as we sat on the floor in the cavernous passenger area of our blue van. We sat on carpet samples because my father had torn out the seats in a sober rage not long after he bought the van from a crazy white man.

I have three brothers and three sisters now. Back then, I had four of each. I missed one of the funerals and cried myself sick during the other one.

"Make room," my father would say again—he said everything twice—and only then would we scramble to make space for the Indian hitchhiker.

Of course, it was easy enough to make room for one hitchhiker, but Indians usually travel in packs. Once or twice, we picked up entire all-Indian basketball teams, along with their coaches, girlfriends, and cousins. Fifteen, twenty Indian strangers squeezed into the back of a blue van with nine wide-eyed Indian kids.

Back in those days, I loved the smell of Indians, and of Indian hitchhikers in particular. They were usually in some stage of drunkenness, often in need of soap and towel, and always ready to sing.

Oh, the songs! Indian blues bellowed at the highest volumes. We called them "49s," those cross-cultural songs that combined Indian lyrics and rhythms with country-and-Western and blues melodies. It seemed that every Indian knew all the lyrics to every Hank Williams song ever recorded. Hank was our Jesus, Patsy Cline was our Madonna, and Freddy Fender, George Jones, Conway Twitty, Loretta Lynn, Tammy Wynette, Charley Pride, Ronnie Milsap, Tanya Tucker, Marty Robbins, Johnny Horton, Donna Fargo, and Charlie Rich were our disciples.

We all know that nostalgia is dangerous, but I remember those days with a clear conscience. We live in different days now, and there aren't as many Indian hitchhikers as there used to be.

TODAY, I drive my own car, a 1998 Toyota Camry, the best-selling automobile in the United States, and therefore the one most often stolen. *Consumer Reports* has named it the most reliable family sedan for sixteen years running, and I believe them.

With my Camry I pick up three or four Indian hitchhikers a week. Mostly men. They're usually headed home, back to their reservations or somewhere close to their reservations. Indians hardly ever travel in a straight line, so a Crow Indian might hitchhike west when his reservation is back east in Montana. He has some people to see in Seattle, he might explain if I ever asked him. But I never ask Indians their reasons for hitchhiking. They were Indian, walking, raising a thumb, and I was there to pick them up.

At the newspaper where I work, my fellow-reporters think I'm crazy to pick up hitchhikers. They're all white and never stop to pick up anybody, let alone an Indian. After all, we're the ones who write the stories and headlines: "HITCHHIKER KILLS HUSBAND AND WIFE," "MISSING GIRL'S BODY FOUND," "RAPIST STRIKES AGAIN." If I really tried, maybe I could explain to them why I pick up any Indian, but who wants to try? Instead, if they ask I just give them a smile and turn back to my computer. My co-workers smile back and laugh loudly. They're always laughing loudly at me, at one another, at themselves, at goofy typos in the newspaper, at the idea of hitchhikers.

I dated one of them for a few months. Cindy. She covered the local courts: speeding tickets and divorces, drunk driving and embezzlement. Cindy firmly believed in the who-what-where-when-why-and-how of journalism. In daily conversation, she talked like she was writing the lead of her latest story. Hell, she talked like that in bed.

"How does that feel?" I would ask, quite possibly becoming the only Indian

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man who has ever asked that question.

“I love it when you touch me there,” she would answer. “But it would help if you rubbed it about thirty per cent lighter and with your thumb instead of your middle finger. And could you maybe turn the radio to a different station? KYZY would be good. I feel like soft jazz will work better for me right now. A minor chord, a C or G-flat, or something like that. O.K., honey?”

During lovemaking, I would get so exhausted by the size of her vocabulary that I would fall asleep before my orgasm, continue pumping away as if I were awake, and then regain consciousness with a sudden start when I finally did come, more out of reflex than passion.

Don’t get me wrong. Cindy was a good one, cute and smart, funny as hell, a good catch no matter how you define it, but she was also one of those white women who only date brown-skinned guys. Indians like me, black dudes, Mexicans, even a few Iranians. I started to feel like a trophy, or like one of those entries in a personal ad. I asked Cindy why she never dated pale boys.

“White guys bore me,” she said. “All they want to talk about is their fathers.”

“What do brown guys talk about?” I asked her.

“Their mothers,” she said and laughed, then promptly left me for a public defender who was half Japanese and half African—a combination that left Cindy dizzy with the interracial possibilities.

Since Cindy, I haven’t dated anyone. I live in my studio apartment with the ghosts of two dogs, Felix and Oscar, and a laptop computer stuffed with bad poems, the aborted halves of three novels, and some three-paragraph personality pieces I wrote for the newspaper.

I’m a features writer, and an Indian at that, so I get all the shit jobs. Not the dangerous shit jobs or the monotonous shit jobs. No. I get to write the articles designed to please the eye, ear, and heart. And there is no journalism more soul-endangering to write than journalism that aims to please.

So it was with reluctance that I hopped into my car last week and headed down Highway 2 to write some damn pleasant story about some damn pleasant people. Then I saw the Indian hitchhiker standing beside the road. He looked the way Indian hitchhikers usually look. Long, straggly black hair. Brown eyes and skin. Missing a couple of teeth. Bad complexion. Crooked nose that had been broken more than once. Big, misshapen ears. A few whiskers masquerading as a mustache. Even before he climbed into my car, I could tell he was tough. He had some serious muscles that threatened to rip through his blue-jeans and denim jacket. When he was in the car, I could see his hands up close and they told the whole story. His fingers were twisted into weird shapes, and his knuckles were covered with layers of scar tissue.

“Jeez,” I said. “You’re a fighter, enit?”

The hitchhiker looked down at his hands, flexed them into fists. I could tell it hurt him to do that.

“Yeah,” he said.

I pulled back onto the highway, looking over my shoulder to check my blind spot.

“What tribe are you?” I asked him.

“Lummi,” he said. “What about you?”

“Spokane.”

“I know some Spokanes. Haven’t seen them in a long time.”

He clutched his backpack in his lap like he didn’t want to let it go for nothing. He reached inside a pocket and pulled out a piece of deer jerky. I recognized it by the smell.

“Want some?” he asked.

“Sure.”

It had been a long time since I’d eaten jerky. The salt, the gamy taste. I felt as Indian as Indian gets, driving down the road in a fast car, chewing on jerky, talking to an indigenous fighter.

“Where you headed?” I asked.

“Home. Back to the rez.”

I nodded my head as I passed a big truck. The driver gave us a smile as we went by. I tooted the horn.

“Big truck,” said the fighter.

I HAVEN’T lived on my reservation for years. But I live in Spokane, which is only an hour’s drive from the rez. Still, I hardly ever go there. I don’t know why not. I don’t think about it much, I guess, but my mom and dad still live in the same house where I grew up. My brothers and sisters, too. The ghosts of my two dead siblings share an apartment in the converted high school. Believe me. It’s just a local call from Spokane to the rez, so I talk to all of them once or twice a week. Smoke signals courtesy of the U.S. West Communications. Sometimes they call me up to talk about the stories they’ve seen that I write for the newspaper. Pet pigs and support groups and science fairs. Once in a while, I used to fill in for the obituaries writer when she was sick. Then she died, and I had to write her obituary.

“How far you going?” asked the fighter, meaning how much closer was he going to get to his reservation than he was now.

“Up to Wenatchee,” I said. “I’ve got some people to interview there.”

“Interview? What for?”

“I’m a reporter. I work for the newspaper.”

“No,” said the fighter, looking at me

like I was stupid for thinking he was stupid. "I mean, what's the story about?"

"Oh, not much. There's two sets of twins who work for the fire department. Human-interest stuff, you know?"

"Two sets of twins, enit? That's weird."

He offered me more deer jerky, but I was too thirsty from the salty meat, so I offered him a Pepsi instead. It's a little-known fact that Indians can be broken up into two distinct groups: Pepsi tribes and Coke tribes.

"Don't mind if I do," he said. He was obviously a member of a Pepsi tribe.

"They're in a cooler on the back seat," I said. "Grab me one, too."

He maneuvered his backpack carefully and found room enough to reach into the back seat for the soda pop. He opened my can first and handed it to me. I took a big mouthful and hiccupped loudly.

"That always happens to me when I drink cold things," he said.

We sipped slowly after that. I kept my eyes on the road while he stared out his window into the wheat fields. We were quiet for many miles.

"Who do you fight?" I asked as we passed through another anonymous small town.

"Mostly Indians," he said. "Money fights, you know? I go from rez to rez, fighting the best they have. Winner takes all."

"Jeez, I never heard of that."

"Yeah, I guess it's illegal."

He rubbed his hands together. I could see fresh wounds.

"Man," I said. "Those fights must be rough."

The fighter stared out the window. I watched him for a little too long and almost drove off the road. Car horns sounded all around us.

"Jeez," the fighter said. "Close one, enit?"

"Close enough," I said.

He pulled his backpack closer to him, using it as a barrier between his chest and the dashboard. An Indian hitchhiker's version of a passenger-side air bag.

"Who'd you fight last?" I asked, trying to concentrate on the road.

"Some Flathead kid," he said. "In Arlee. He was supposed to be the toughest Indian in the world."

"Was he?"

"Nah, no way. Wasn't even close. Wasn't even tougher than me."

He told me how big the Flathead

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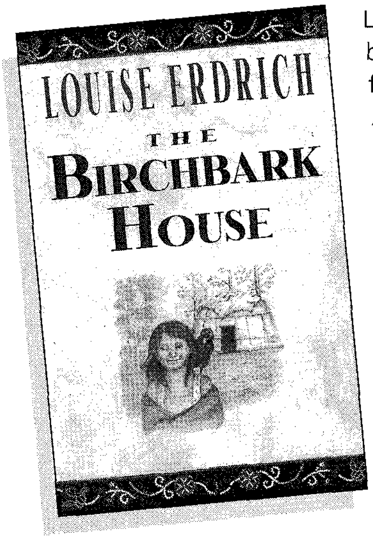

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kid was, way over six feet tall and two hundred and some pounds. Big buck Indian. Had hands as big as this and arms as big as that. Had a chin like a damn buffalo. The fighter told me that he hit the Flathead kid harder than he ever hit anybody before.

"I hit him like he was a white man," the fighter said. "I hit him like he was two or three white men rolled into one."

But the Flathead kid would not go down, even though his face swelled up so bad that he looked like the Elephant Man. There were no referees, no judge, no bells to signal the end of the round. The winner was the Indian still standing. Punch after punch, man, and the kid would not go down.

"I was so tired after a while," said the fighter, "that I just took a step back and watched the kid. He stood there with his arms down, swaying from side to side like some toy, you know? Head bobbing on his neck like there was no bone at all. You couldn't even see his eyes no more. He was all messed up."

"What'd you do?" I asked.

"Ah, hell, I couldn't fight him no more. That kid was planning to die before he ever went down. So I just sat on the ground while they counted me out. Dumb Flathead kid didn't even know what was happening. I just sat on the ground while they raised his hand. While all the winners collected their money and all the losers cussed me out. I just sat there, man."

"Jeez," I said. "What happened next?"

"Not much. I sat there until everybody was gone. Then I stood up and headed for home. I'm tired of this shit. I just want to go home for a while. I got enough money to last me a long time. I'm a rich Indian, you hear? I'm a rich Indian."

The fighter finished his Pepsi with one last swallow, rolled down his window, and pitched the can out. I almost protested, but decided against it. I kept my empty can wedged between my legs.

"That's a hell of a story," I said.

"Ain't no story," he said. "It's what happened."

"Jeez," I said. "You would've been a warrior in the old days, enit? You would've been a killer. You would've stolen everybody's goddam horses. That would've been you. You would've been it."

I was excited. I wanted the fighter to know how much I thought of him. He didn't even look at me.

"A killer," he said. "Sure."

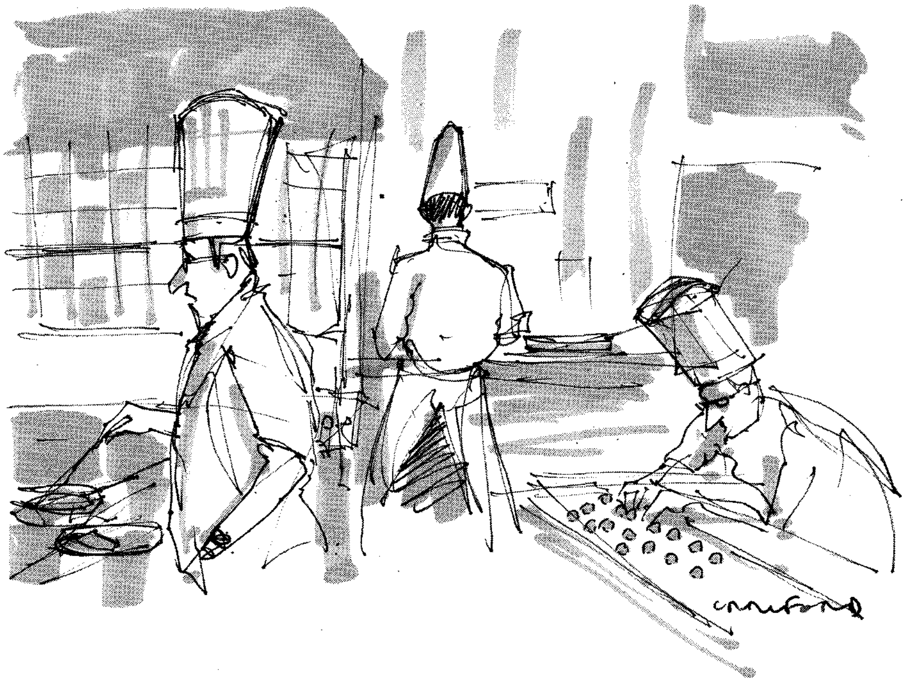
WE didn't talk much after that. I pulled into Wenatchee just before sundown, and the fighter seemed happy to be leaving me.

"Thanks for the ride, cousin," he said as he climbed out. Indians always call each other cousin, especially if they're strangers.

"Wait," I said.

He looked at me, waiting impatiently.

I wanted to know if he had a place to sleep that night. It was supposed to



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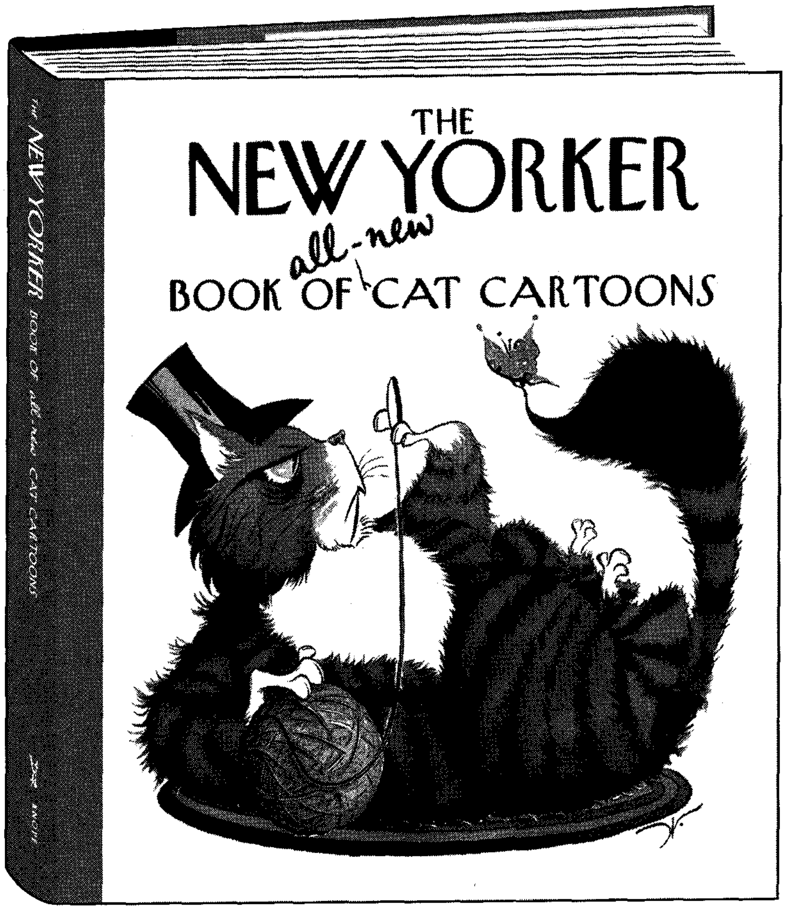
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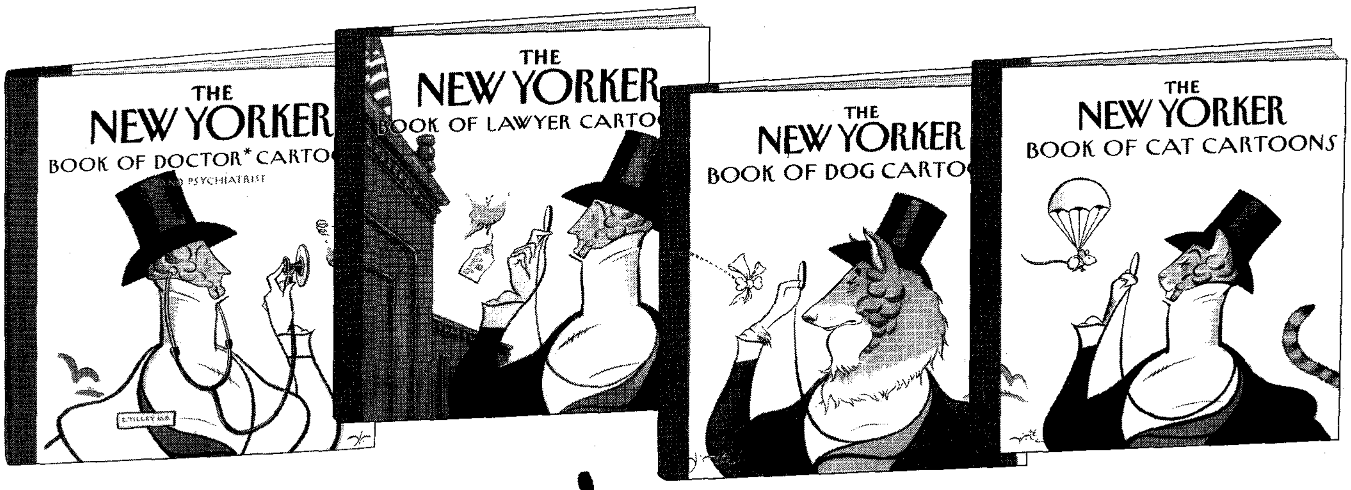
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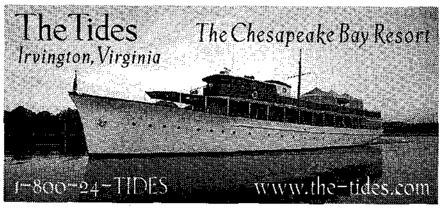

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get cold. There was a mountain range between Wenatchee and his reservation. Big mountains that used to be volcanoes. Big mountains that were still volcanoes. It could all blow up at any time. We wrote about it once in the newspaper. Things can change so quickly. So many emergencies and disasters that we can barely keep track. I wanted to tell him how much I cared about my job, even if I had to write about small-town firemen. I wanted to tell the fighter that I always picked up every Indian hitchhiker, young and old, men and women. Believe me. I pick them up and get them all a little closer to home, even if I can't get them all the way. I wanted to tell him that the night sky was a graveyard. I wanted to know if he was the toughest Indian in the world.

"It's late," I finally said. "You can crash with me, if you want."

He studied my face and then looked down the long road toward his reservation.

"O.K.," he said. "That sounds good."

We got a room at the Pony Soldier Motel, and both of us laughed at the irony of it all. Inside the room, in a generic watercolor hanging above the bed, the U.S. Cavalry was kicking the crap out of a band of renegade Indians.

"What tribe you think they are?" I asked the fighter.

"All of them," he said.

The fighter crashed on the floor while I curled up in the uncomfortable bed. I couldn't sleep for the longest time. I listened to the fighter talk in his sleep. I stared up at the water-stained ceiling. I don't know what time it was when I finally drifted off, and I don't know what time it was when the fighter got into bed with me. He was naked and his penis was hard. I could feel it press against my back as he snuggled up close to me, reached inside my underwear, and took my penis in his hand. Neither of us said a word. He just continued to stroke me as he rubbed himself against my back. That went on for a long time. I had never been that close to another man, but the fighter's callused fingers felt better than I would have imagined if I had ever allowed myself to imagine such things.

"This isn't working," he whispered. "I can't come."

Without thinking, I reached around and took the fighter's penis in my hand. He was surprisingly small.

"No," he said. "I want to be inside you."

"I don't know," I said. "I've never done this before."

"It's O.K.," he said. "I'll be careful. I have rubbers."

Without waiting for my answer, he released me and got up from the bed. I turned to look at him. He was beautiful and scarred. So much brown skin marked with bruises, badly healed wounds, and tattoos. His long black hair was unbraided and hung down to his thin waist. My slacks and dress shirt were carefully folded and draped over the chair near the window. My shoes were sitting on the table. Blue light filled the room. The fighter bent down to his pack and searched for his condoms. For reasons I could not explain then and cannot explain now, I kicked off my underwear and rolled over on my stomach. I could not see him, but I could hear him breathing heavily as he found the condoms, tore open a package, and rolled one over his penis. He crawled onto the bed, between my legs, and slid a pillow beneath my belly.

"Are you ready?" he asked.

"I'm not gay," I said.

"Sure," he said as he pushed himself into me. He was small but it hurt more than I expected, and I knew I would be sore for days afterward. But I wanted him to save me. He didn't say anything. He just pumped into me for a few minutes, came with a loud sigh, and then pulled out. Believe me. I wanted him to save me. I quickly rolled off the bed and went into the bathroom. I locked the door behind me and stood there in the dark. I smelled like salmon.

"Hey," the fighter said through the door. "Are you O.K.?"

"Yes," I said. "I'm fine."

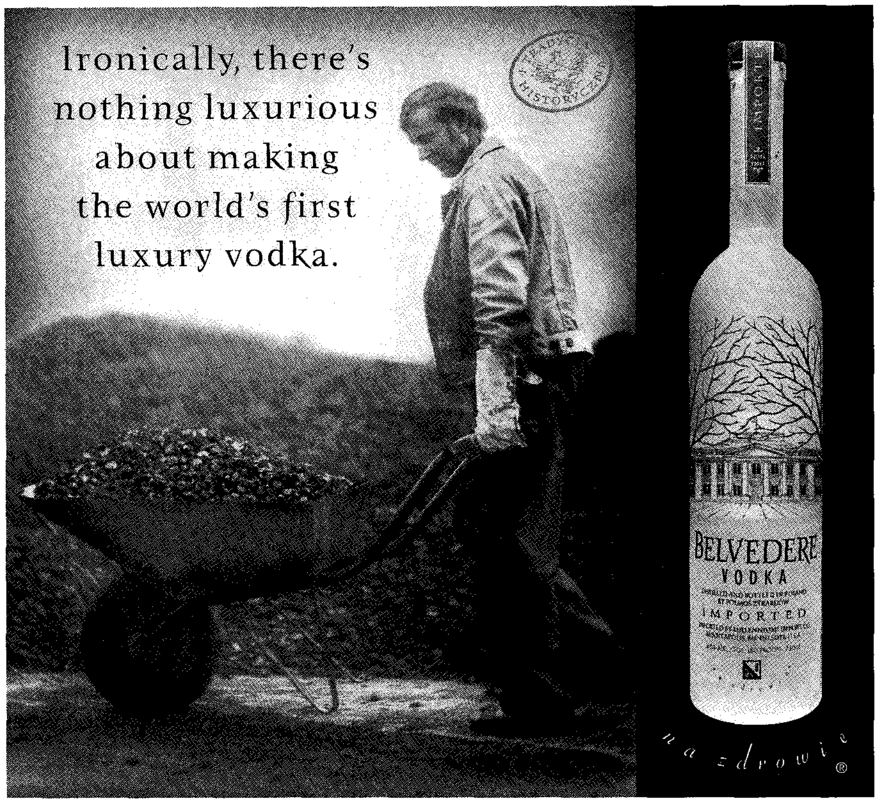
A long silence.

"Hey," he said. "Would you mind if I slept in the bed with you?"

I had no answer to that.

"Listen," I said. "That Flathead boy you fought? You know, the one you really beat up? The one who wouldn't fall down?"

In my mind, I could see the fighter pummelling that boy. Punch after punch. The boy too beaten to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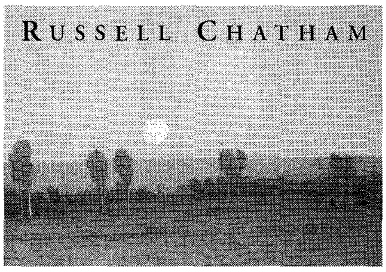

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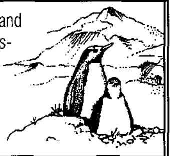

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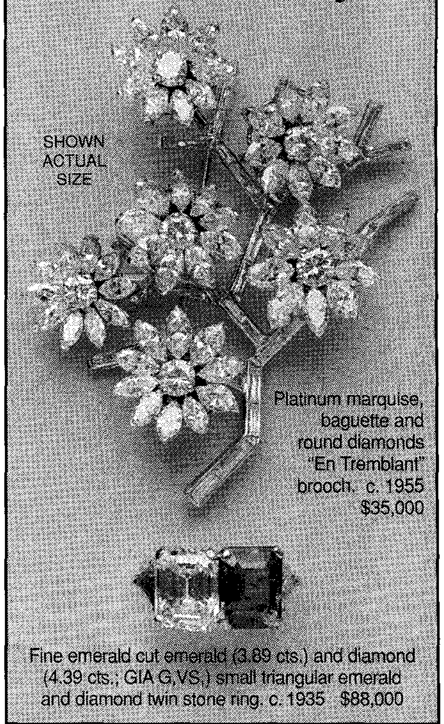

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fight back but too strong to fall down.

"Yeah, what about him?" asked the fighter.

"What was his name?"

"His name?"

"Yeah, his name."

"Elmer something or other."

"Did he have an Indian name?"

"I have no idea. How the hell would I know that?"

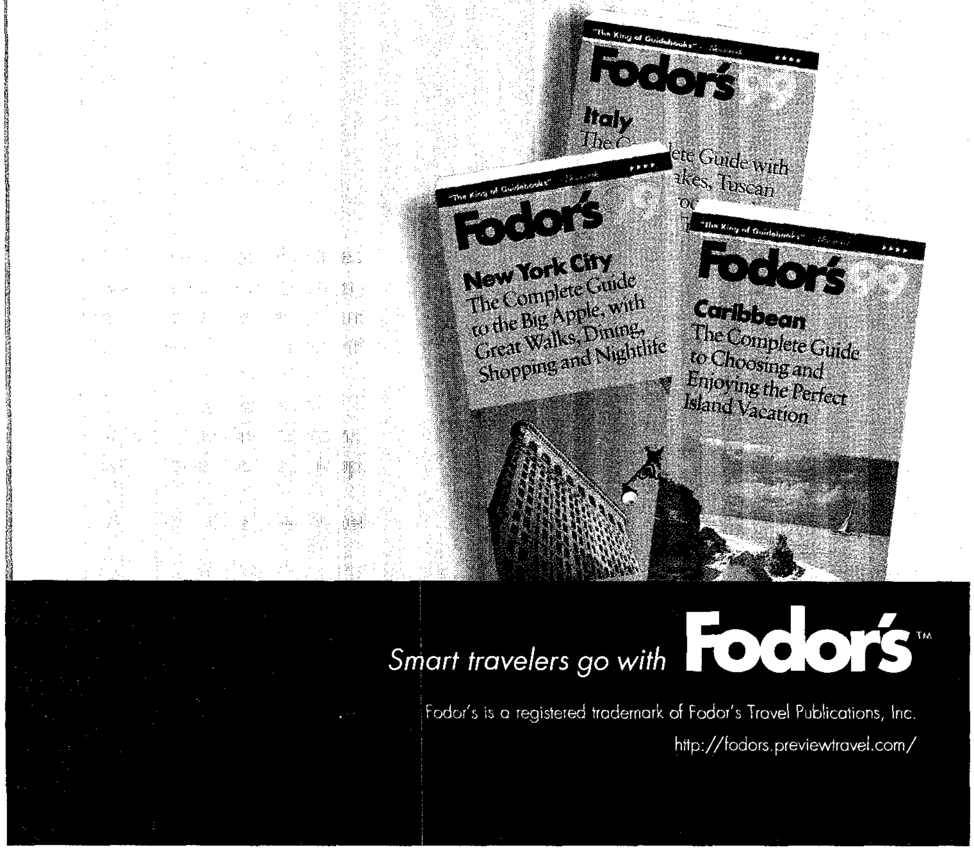
I stood there in the dark for a long time. I was chilled. I wanted to get into bed and fall asleep.

"Hey," I said. "I think, I think maybe—well, I think you should leave now."

"Yeah," the fighter said. He was not surprised. I could hear him softly singing as he dressed and stuffed all of his belongings into his pack. I couldn't tell what he was singing, but I wanted to know. I opened the bathroom door just as he was opening the door to leave. He stopped, looked back at me, and smiled.

"Hey, tough guy," he said. "You were good."

The fighter walked out the door then, leaving it open, and walked away. I stood in the doorway and watched him continue his walk down the highway, past the city limits. I watched him rise from earth to sky and become a new constellation. I closed the door and wondered what was going to happen next. Feeling uncomfortable and cold, I went back into the bathroom. I ran the shower with the hottest water possible. I stared at myself in the mirror. Steam quickly filled the room. I threw a few shadow punches. Feeling stronger, I got in the shower and searched my body for changes. A middle-aged man needs to look for tumors. I dried myself with a towel too small for the job. Then I crawled naked into bed. I wondered if I was a warrior in this life and if I had been a warrior in a previous life. Lonely and laughing, I fell asleep. I didn't dream at all, not one bit. Or perhaps I did dream, but I can't remember any of it. Instead, I woke early the next morning, before sunrise, and went out into the world. I walked past my car. I stepped onto the pavement, still warm from the previous day's sun. I started walking. In bare feet, I travelled upriver toward the place where I was born and will someday die. Believe me. At that moment, if you had broken open my heart you could have looked inside and seen the thin white skeletons of a thousand salmon. ◆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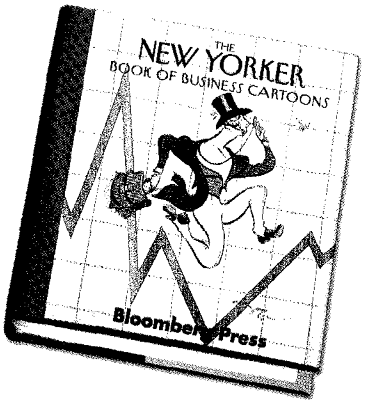
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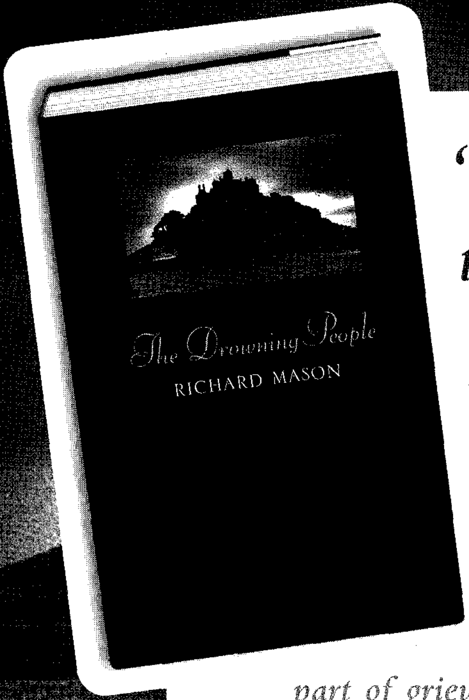

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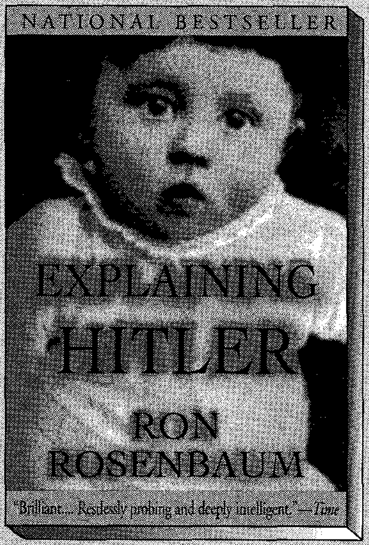
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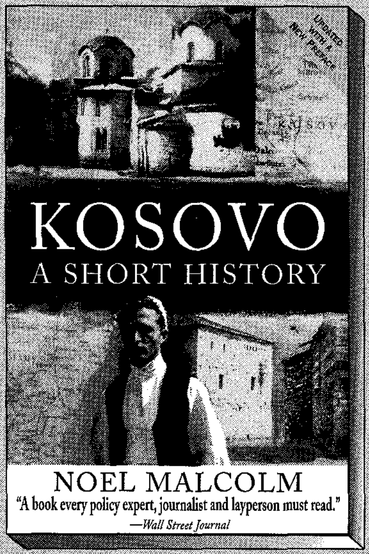
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HAWAIIAN NIGHT

RICK MOODY

A LIMBO bar festooned with streamers, by the bathhouse entrance. Tuna on shish kebab and pineapple slices in large stainless-steel serving cisterns arranged on a buffet table. At the edge of the snack bar, the undergrad who gave golf lessons, in chef's hat and lei, carving a roast pig. The carcass had menaced the staff from the walk-in kitchen fridge for *upwards of five days.* The Olson kid, chaperoned on either side by his parents, in the moment of asking if they had *cooked, you know, the pig on a spit.* Logical inquiry under the circumstances, on Hawaiian Night. No evidence, however, of a spit. Polynesian slide guitar drifted across the patio, from a concealed speaker. Don Ho.

Lena Beechwood, at Table No. 1 (my table, though she was no relation of mine), worried aloud about her crew for the Round Island Race, peppering her sentences with fine acerbities: *Pete Evans got his jib twisted in the middle of the Memorial Day course, just let the sheet right out of his hands.* They'd placed second, when they could very well have won, and so *He won't do, won't do at all, you just can't trust him.* They could take Evans's wife, Hunter, but she was sluggish from having the twins and might not have the energy or the reflexes. Second place goes to the weary, to the inert.

Northeastern sun, that pink hatbox, drifted into a margin of haze as the kids of Hawaiian Night threw off their regulation jackets and ties or their cardigan sweaters and flats and began to caper on the lawn. The Costellos, Dan and Pete and Gretchen; the appallingly smart Sam Harvey, who intimidated everybody else's towheads; little René Hennessy, with the platinum-blond crewcut and the French accent—his parents had been transferred to the Paris office, but they made it back across the pond for August; Marilyn Wendell, who would almost certainly get as stout as her mom, and, like her mom, be the consort of all local boys *until that day.* Two dozen kids, maybe, interchangeable, by virtue of their long-standing acquaintance; interchangeable, by virtue of the physical resemblances each to each; interchangeable, by virtue of the hidden entanglements of their parents over the years, or by virtue of these times. Perhaps it was simply that all children were one phylum, one kingdom, one species, one throbbing, pulsating corpus of velocity, language, and enthusiasm.

Andrew Grimm's boy and girl were thick in the stew, though Andrew's wife had died the summer before. The Grimms had taken the cigarette boat out, at dusk, with Ellen Moss and a shaker of cocktails, to pick up house guests who'd missed the last ferry. In the course of demonstrating for Ellen just how fast the Pretty Young Thing could go—she on the wheel, he the throttle, Andy's wife, Debby, gazing pacifically upon the action—they had jumped a large wake. One engine failed, the craft lifted up into the air, and they began to spiral to port, to be thrown into the magnificent bay. Outboards exposed in the shadows above the three of them. Here comes tragedy. As Andy and Debby and Ellen bobbed and ducked and breaststroked, laughing nervously at first, their unmanned boat embarked on its repetitive circular course, leftward, sinisterly, coming around and bearing down again on the three swimmers, who couldn't match its forty-nine miles per hour (fifty if you tilted the engines just so), who couldn't get out of its way. The boat struck Andy's wife decisively and crushed a plurality of vertebrae. Andy Grimm served as distraught witness, with the craft circling ominously between himself and the afflicted woman. Ellen Moss called out to Debby across the water, having just sidestroked inside the perimeter of the concentric rings that the Pretty Young Thing made in chop and spray. *Don't move!* Then Ellen Moss, of Foyle, Decker, Greenwood and Peacock, Management Consultants, Ellen Moss of the size-four tennis skirts, of the collection of antique porcelain miniatures, Ellen Moss risked heavily insured life and limb to swim back to Debby Grimm, to remove Debby from harm's way, to hold her as she lost consciousness, Ellen Moss whispering endearments as best she could, *Just a minute or two, huh?*, while Andy watched, immobilized by the menace of events. At last, a passing speedboat threw out its coils, hauled them from the sea, and the trouble really began. Debby's pulse fibrillated and then quit. The Coast Guard spent a couple of hours trying to figure out how to put a stop to the circular imperatives, the eternal return at forty-nine miles per hour of the Pretty Young Thing. Then they tangled its prop in a drift net.

HULA
HAWAII
HAW

THOMAS STEELE, "THE HAWAIIAN SHIRT"

Yet here were Debby's kids on the lawn with the others, and it was proof that you could vanish from this sweet, colorful existence one summer, and the next summer Hawaiian Night would go off without a hitch, as with the Thursday-night dances, so with the annual complaints about club dues, and so forth. The tennis instructor, Marla, chased Robby Pigeon out of the ice-cream line, from which he had swiped a stainless-steel scoop and was now tongue-bathing it, consuming its strawberry delights, defiling the club's make-your-own-sundae apparatus with his infantile contagions, the Grimm children right behind him, giggling. Marla, it appeared, wore plastic green palm fronds, a South Pacific plumage, over U.S.T.A.-approved whites, as she chased them past the beverage table.

Collectively the children of Hawaiian Night next divined that the leis, which had been bunched, folded, and gathered on an assembly line in Edison, New Jersey, could be untwisted, stretched, and retooled to resemble antique ticker tape, expanding to a length of nearly sixteen feet, something like the footage of Lena Beechwood's small, sleek round-the-island sailing vessel. Andy Grimm's son, last seen wearing khakis, blue-and-white striped button-down Oxford shirt, beige corduroy jacket, and white bucks, now clad only in his trousers, emerged from a swelling population of kids carrying the orange streamer that had been his lei, like a banner proclaiming this club, this lawn, this evening, this way of life his own, where minutes before only the present had been his concern, as he raced from the end of *Court No. 3* over to the Adirondack chairs by the swimming pool, staking his claim at the site marked *Shallow water, no diving.* I confess that I held my breath as I tried, through the incantation of worry, to stave off further Grimm calamity, in which little Drew toppled over the Adirondack chairs, hovered briefly in the air, gathered gravitational freight, broke the surface of the wading end of the pool, struck bottom, cracked his skull, and then bobbed in the shallows, deceased, as Andrew Grimm, insurance executive, recited his next canto of loss. But nothing horrible would happen on this voluptuous Hawaiian Night as five, ten, twelve, fifteen kids chased each other with tropical decorations in the stiff, humid preliminaries of a late-summer storm.

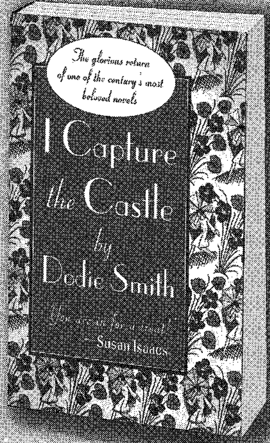
The automatic sprinklers that watered the Har-Tru courts were engaged by the coming of twilight.

The children began to wet themselves down.

Ghostly, a grandfather, from a neglected constituency of grandfathers, appeared at the top of the step where I sat with a camera that I would never remove from its case. Whose grandfather I don't know, though it would not have been hard to discern convictions, familial traits, resemblances, in the salt-and-pepper fringe around back and sides, upright posture, absence of socks, cable-knit sweater in *Franconia green* ordered from one of the larger catalogues. I recognized him, of course, as it hadn't been more than a week since I had espied him in the midst of a practice swing on the first fairway, just as he dislodged, in a manner so vulnerable it provoked a yelp in me, his entire top bridge, so that golf ball and false teeth, in different directions, tumbled into that large, humiliating sand trap just over the lip of the hill.

Look at them, the grandfather said with oratorical authority. As the kids sported in tennis-court fountains. *Look at them. Thankful for nothing, not for the sprinklers, not for the moon, not for the salty wind that blows around the mist, not for the way these events get arranged. When I was their age, I had a teacher in school whose car had lost its old rusty fender. Used to see her driving back and forth from school. She always waved, was always cheerful, but it was obvious that she couldn't afford to get a new fender for her car, who the hell knows why. I think it was a Pontiac. What I did was as follows: I took up a collection among my fellow-classmates. It wasn't Christmas or Be Nice to Your Teacher Day or anything else, nor was I trying to avert punishment or suck up to my teacher or any such thing. Everyone chipped in a dollar, or maybe their parents chipped in a dollar, whatever it took. My father knew a good mechanic who in turn knew a good spare-parts man, and one thing led to another, and next day at school we presented Mrs. Pendleton with a new fender for her Pontiac. I was the same age*

Who Says There's Nothing Good to Read?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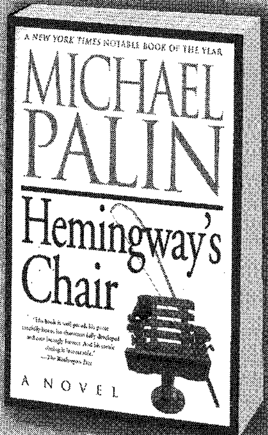

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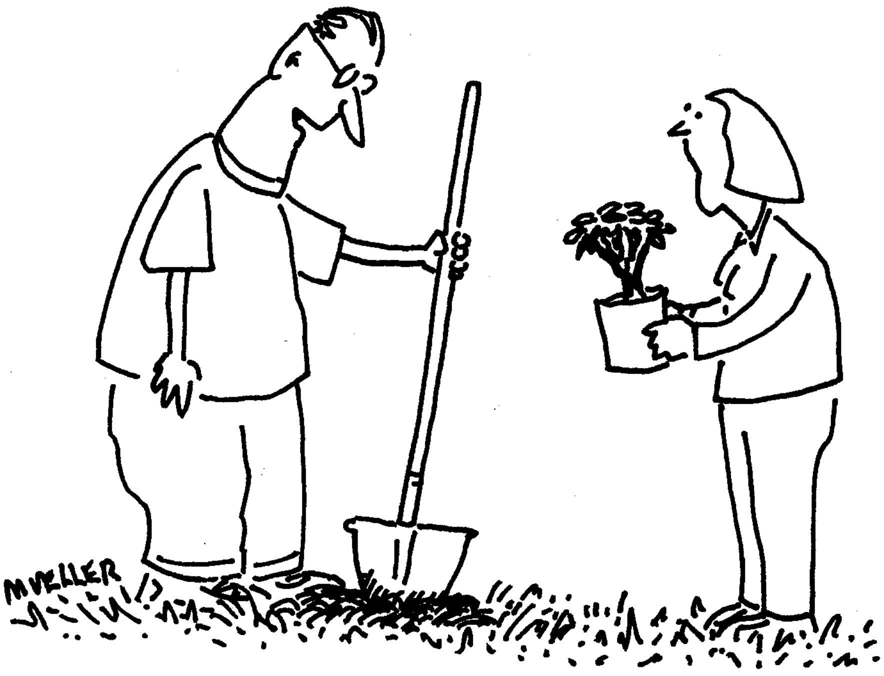

"Well, I'll be darned. There's a really nice hardwood floor under here."

• •

as those kids out there, not a day older. I went through plenty of difficult times myself, times when the red ink was more plentiful around our house than the black ink, that's about how old I am, but I could still afford to help Mrs. Pendleton when I was their age.

Hurricane coming up the coast. Almost certain now. In the coming hours, we would board up our large windows and secure our powerboats. Eternally, in this late-summer moment, Debby Grimm seemed to fall delicately out of the western sky, somewhere between here and the mainland, the Pretty Young Thing plunging after her, and we felt what we could bear to feel and sought refuge in our gardens or on our patios, firing up propane barbecues, lacquering ribs, shucking genetically engineered corn hybrids. Pretty Young Thing appeared out of the fog, and I chronicled its progress—rising up to port, skidding up on beach debris, tumbling end over end, and bursting into flames.

I felt a strong need to corner the chef, before repairing to any *limbo entertainment.* What was the recipe for that calamari? As I stole toward the club ballroom, Andy Grimm himself passed silently by, in his wake the faint but unmistakable pungencies of *remorse and survival.* Immediately, I noticed the following, catalogued on the bulletin board by the water fountain: *Eric Pigeon, fourteen-and-under tennis, gold ribbon. Handmaid's Shoppe, designer items 50% off now until Columbus Day. Lost: Male Wedding Band, call Nick Fox.*

Who would come closest to the floor, as Afro-Cuban jazz began to summon, through its familiars, all my summers past as well as the last days of the Batista regime, gambling, prostitution, Catholic heresies. Families gathered, mothers laid their arms on the shoulders of their sons, and damp infants played underneath an old grand piano that had been rolled into a corner behind draperies. Sterling McGeeney, matriculating at Yale in ten days, as had her old man and his old man, elbows flush against hips, rocked like a religious convert and slipped under the limbo bar. Married men averted their gazes. Sterling's sister, Eveline, tripped the bar, catching it on a billowing sleeve, and was disqualified. Alice Pigeon, her party dress so wet it was practically translucent, snuck under. There was a braying of wind instruments. The club manager removed pegs, lowered the bar. It was close enough to the dusty ballroom floor as to permit no passage to *the other side,* to the warehouse of infinite childhoods. Claire Barnaby, sunflower of a girl, in understated flannel skirt and pullover sweater, intent on getting under, was denied. Sterling McGeeney, despite early successes, was now also turned back. The limbo bar reverberated and the needle was lifted from the old record player and Dave, the golf manager, feigned a good-natured frustration.The next contestant was the Grimms' melancholy daughter, Celine.

Need I point out that I had no children myself, that in the tidal flux of the generations I no longer voted *with the kids*, on that side of the ballroom. Twenty-odd years of lessons in deportment and racket sports, twenty-odd years of suing for the affections of Cary Evans and Nina Oxford, twenty-odd years of stolen drinks and brain fevers and fender benders, all behind me, though I still attempted to shuffle to the Latin rhythms that accompanied this particular soirée. Neither was I among the fathers and mothers, whose free instants were given over to the private-school applications of their kids, adjustable-rate mortgages, loopholes in the capital-gains tax, or the privations of long-standing marriages.

My role was to watch. I was not bad at it.

Celine Grimm, laughing, at the threshold. If she passed under, made her body narrower than a first-class envelope filled with bad news, perhaps she would be swept into a flock of gulls or cormorants, and it would be the last we saw of her as she headed toward a first-class cabin in the heavens. I was happy therefore when she, too, stirred the limbo bar, as had her brother before her, as had we all *in our day*. There was no winner. Hawaiian Night hurtled toward repose. We of the northeast Atlantic returned to the Pacific Islanders their paradisal heritage, returned to them this imagery of travel advertisements. Had I ever been more surfeited by a simple falling into darkness? We gathered up lost children, we looked for stray garments, a blue ribbon draped across the tennis net on *Court No. 3*, a pair of cross-training sneakers separated one from the other, we restored the beach balls to the closet in the clubhouse, plucked up that doll sprawled haphazardly in the gravel parking lot beyond the pool. Somebody's cocker spaniel fetched a mossy tennis ball, left it at my feet, and would not be placated until I tossed it for him again. Moments later the hound was back. ◆

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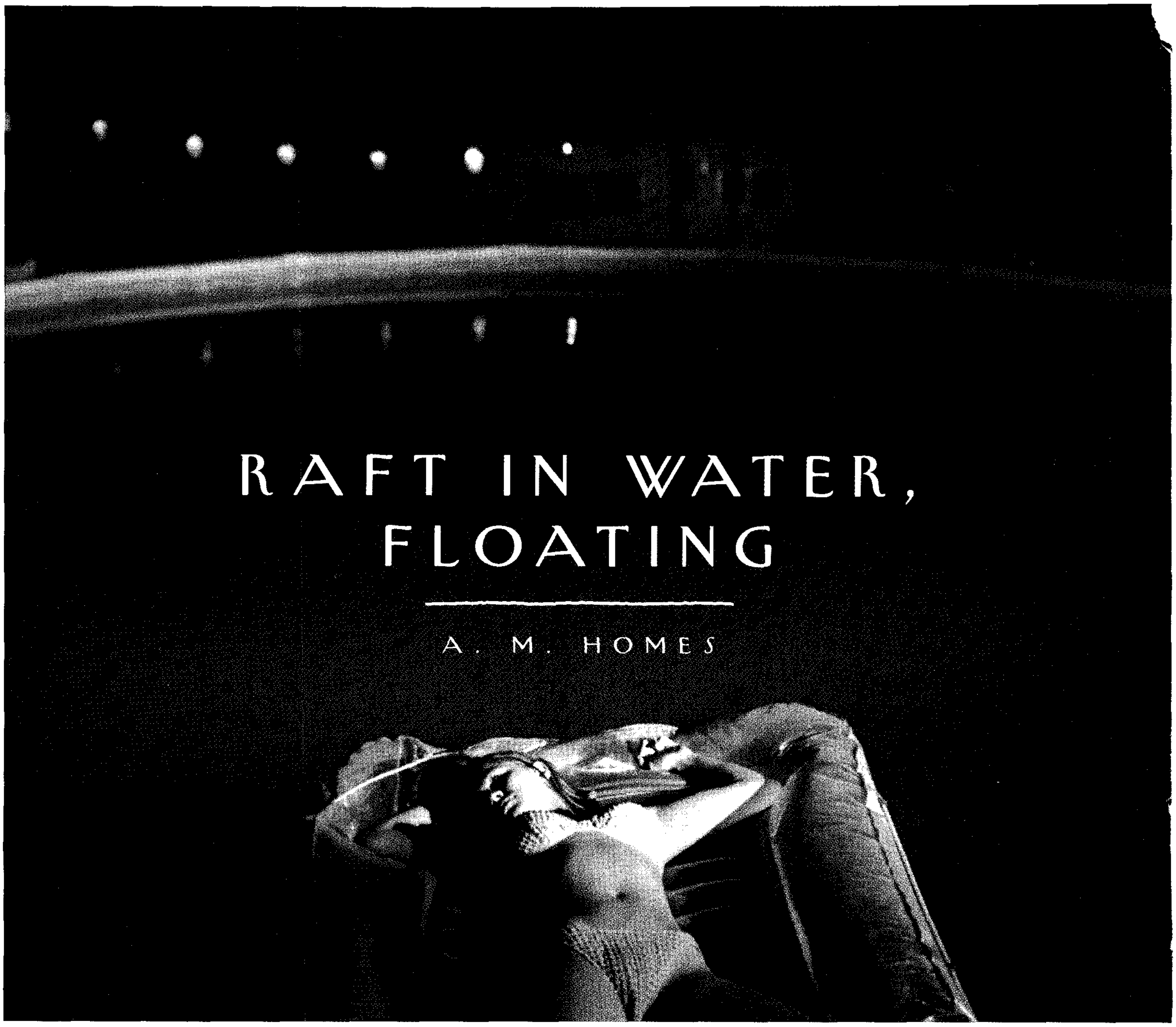
RAFT IN WATER, FLOATING

A. M. HOMES



MALERIE MARDER, "UNTITLED" (1998) / LAWRENCE RUBIN · GREENBERG VAN DOREN

SHE is lying on a raft in water. Floating. Every day when she comes home from school, she puts on her bikini and lies in the pool—it stops her from snacking.

"Appearances are everything," she tells him when he comes crashing through the foliage, arriving at the edge of the yard in his combat pants, thorns stuck to his shirt.

"Next time they change the code to the service gate, remember to tell me," he says. "I had to come in through the Eisenstadts' and under the wire."

He blots his face with the sleeve of his shirt. "There's some sort of warning—I can't remember if it's heat or air."

"I might evaporate," she says, then pauses. "I might spontaneously combust. Do you ever worry about things like that?"

"You can't explode in water," he says.

Her raft drifts to the edge.

He sits by the side of the pool, leaning over, his nose pressed into her belly, sniffing. "You smell like swimming. You smell clean, you smell white, like bleach. When I smell you, my nostrils dilate, my eyes open."

"Take off your shirt," she says.

"I'm not wearing any sunblock," he says.

"Take off your shirt."

He does, pulling it over his head, flashing twin woolly birds' nests under his arms.

He rocks her raft. His combat pants tent. He puts one hand inside her bathing suit and the other down his pants.

She stares at him.

He closes his eyes, his lashes flicker. When he's done, he dips his hand in the pool, splashing it back and forth as though checking the water, taking the temperature. He wipes it on his pants.

"Do you like me for who I am?" she asks.

"Do you want something to eat?" he replies.

"Help yourself."

He gets cookies for himself and a bowl of baby carrots from the fridge for her. The bowl is cold, clear glass, filled with orange stumps. "Butt plugs," he calls them.

The raft is a silver tray, a reflective surface—it holds the heat.

"Do you have any idea what's eating me?"

"You're eating yourself," he says.

A chunk of a Chips Ahoy! falls into the water. It sinks.

She pulls on her snorkel and mask and stares at the sky. The sound of her breath through the tube is amplified, a

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raspy, watery gurgle. "Mallory, my malady, you are my Mallomar, my favorite cookie," he intones. "Chocolate-dipped, squishy . . . You were made for me."

She flips off the raft and into the water. She swims.

"I'm going," she hears him say. "Going, going, gone."

At twilight an odd electrical surge causes the doorbells all up and down the block to ring. An intercom chorus of faceless voices sings a round of "Hi, hello. Can I help you? Is anybody out there?"

She climbs out of the pool, wet feet padding across the flagstone. Behind her is a Japanese rock garden, a retaining wall holding the earth in place like a restraining order. She sits on the warm stones. Dripping. Watering the rocks. In school, when she was little, she was given a can of water and a paintbrush—she remembers painting the playground fence, watching it turn dark and then light again as the water evaporated.

She watches her footprints disappear.

The dog comes out of the house. He puts his nose in her crotch. "Exactly who do you think you are?" she asks, pushing him away.

There is the outline of hills in the distance; they are perched on a cliff, always in danger of falling, breaking away, sliding.

Inside, there is a noise, a flash of light.

"Shit!" her mother yells.

She gets up. She opens the sliding glass door. "What happened?"

"I flicked the switch and the bulb blew."

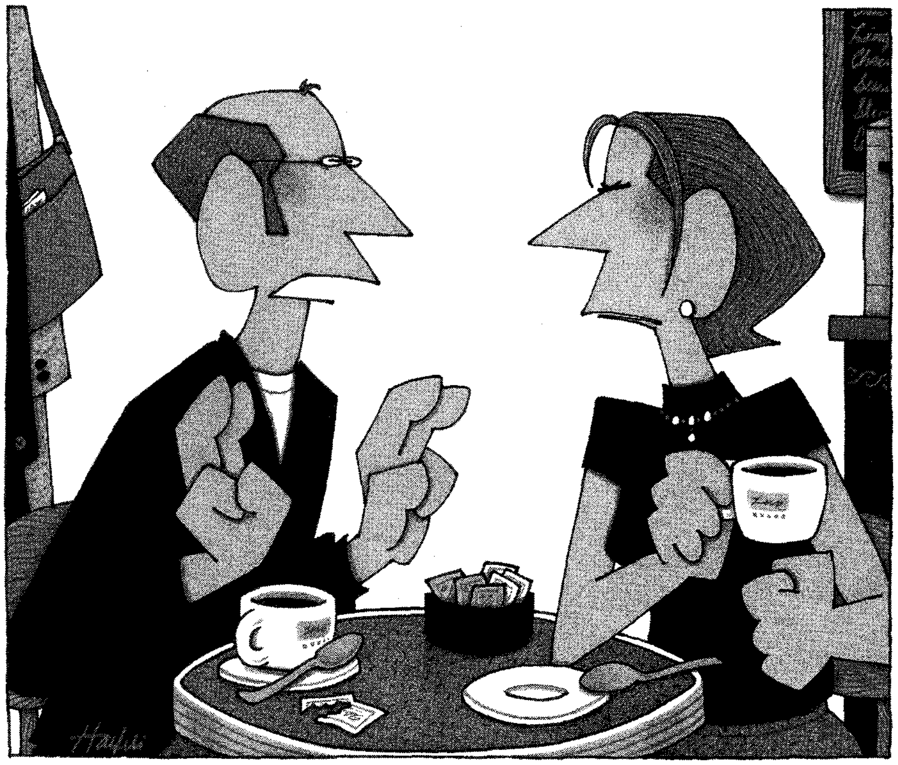
She steps inside—cool white, goose bumps.

"I dropped the plant," her mother says. She has dropped an African violet on its head. "I couldn't see where I was going." She has a blue gel pack strapped to her face. "Headache."

There is dark soil on the carpet. She goes to get the Dustbuster. The television in the kitchen is on, even though no one is watching: "People often have the feeling there is something wrong, that they are not where they should be. . . ."

The dirt is in a small heap, a tiny hill on the powder-blue carpet. In her white crocheted bathing suit, she gets down on her hands and knees and sucks it up. Her mother watches. And then her mother gets down and brushes the carpet back and forth. "Did you get it?" she asks. "Did you get it all?"

"All gone," she says.



"Why is it that every time I say something in quotation marks you respond in italics?"

"I dropped it on its head," her mother says. "I can't bear it. I need to be reminded of beauty," she says. "Beauty is a comfort, a reminder that good things are possible. And I killed it."

"It's not dead," she says. "It's just upside down." Her mother is tall, like a long thin line, like a root going down.

In the front yard they hear men speaking Spanish, the sound of hedge trimmers and weed whackers, frantic scratching, a thousand long fingernails clawing to get in.

There is the feeling of a great divide: us and them. They rely on the cleaning lady and her son to bring them things—her mother claims to have forgotten how to grocery-shop. All they can do is open the refrigerator door and hope there is something inside. They live on the surface in some strange state of siege.

They are standing in the hallway outside her sister's bedroom door.

"You don't own me," her sister says.

"Believe me, I wouldn't want to," a male voice says.

"And why not, aren't I good enough?" her sister says.

"Is she fighting with him again?"

"On speakerphone," her mother says. "I can't tell which one is which, they all sound the same." She knocks on the door. "Did you take your medication, Susie?"

"You are in my way," her sister says, talking louder now.

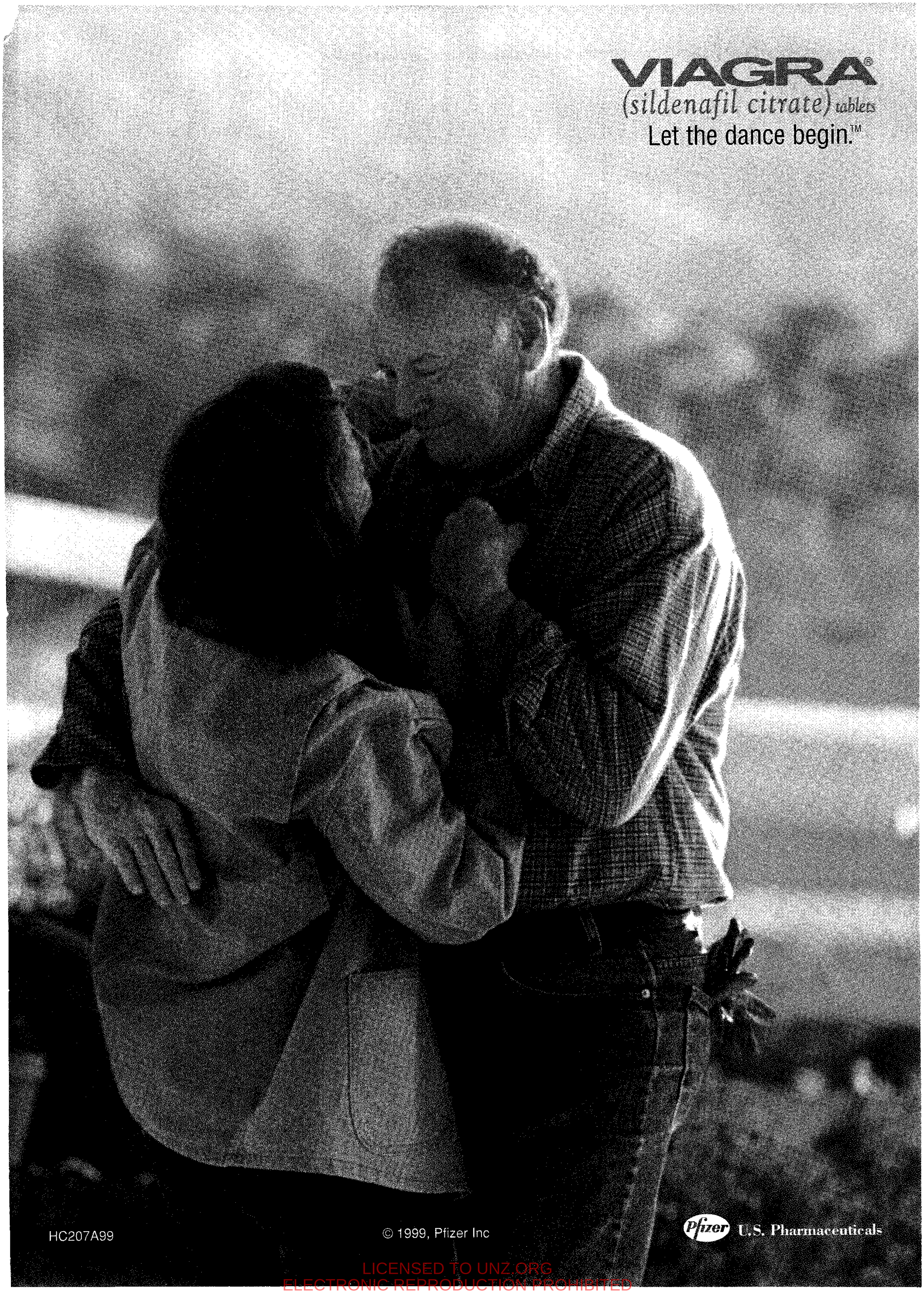
"What do you want to do about dinner?" her mother asks. "Your father is late—can you wait?"

"I had carrots."

She goes into her parents' room and checks herself in the bathroom mirror—still there. Her eyes are green, her lips are chapped pink. Her skin is dry from the chlorine, a little irritated. She turns around and looks over her shoulder—she is pruny in the back, from lying on the wet raft.

She opens the cabinet—jars, tubes, throat cream and thigh cream, lotion, potion, bronze-stick, coverup, pancake, base. She piles it on.

"Make sure you get enough water—it's hot today," her mother says. Her parents have one of those beds where each half does a different thing; right now her father's side is up, bent in two places. They both want what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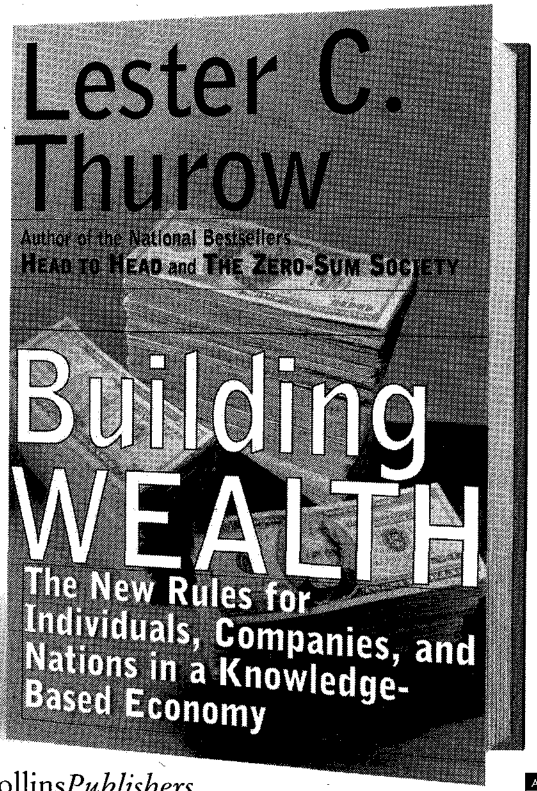
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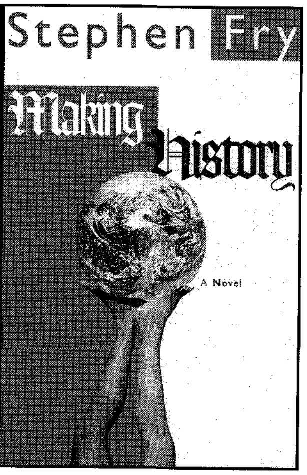

they want, they need what they need. Her mother is lying flat on her face.

She goes back out to the pool. She dives in with a splash. Her mother's potions run off, forming an oil slick around her.

Her father comes home. Through the glass she sees the front door open. She sees him moving from room to room. "Is the air filter on?" His voice is muffled. "Is the air on?" he repeats. "I'm having it again—the not breathing."

He turns on the bedroom light. It throws her parents into relief; the sliding glass doors are lit like a movie screen. Imax Mom and Dad. She watches him unbutton his shirt. "I'm sweating," she hears him say. Even from where she is, she can see that he is wet. Her father calls his sweat "proof of his suffering." Under his shirt, a silk T-shirt is plastered to his body, the dark mat of the hair on his back showing through. There is something obscene about it—like an ape trying to look human. There is something embarrassing about it as well—it looks like lingerie, it makes him look more than naked. She feels as if she were seeing something she shouldn't, something too personal.

Her mother rolls over and sits up.

"Something is not right," he says.

"It's the season," she says.

"Unseasonable," he says. "Ben got a call in the middle of the afternoon. They said his house was going downhill fast. He had to leave early."

"It's an unpredictable place," her mother says.

"It's not the same as it was, that's the thing," her father says, putting on a dry shirt. "Now it's a place where everybody thinks he's somebody and nobody wants to be left out."

She gets out of the pool and goes to the door, pressing her face against the glass. They don't notice her. Finally, she knocks. Her father opens the sliding glass door. "I didn't see you out there," he says.

"I'm invisible," she says. "Welcome home."

She is back in the pool. Floating. The night is moist. Vaporous. It's hard to know if it's been raining or if the sprinkler system is acting up.The sky is charcoal, powdery black. Everything is a little fuzzy around the edges but sharp and clear in the center.

There is a coyote at the edge of the grass. She feels it staring at her. "What?" she says.

It lowers its head and pushes its neck forward, red eyes like red lights.

"What do you want?"

The coyote's legs grow long, its fur turns into an overcoat, it stands, its muzzle melts into a face—an old woman, smiling.

"Who are you?" the girl asks. "Are you friends with my sister?"

"Watch me," the old woman says. She throws off the coyote coat—she is taller, she is younger, she is naked, and then she is a man.

She hears her mother and father in the house. Shouting.

"What am I to you?" her mother says.

"It's the same thing, always the same thing, blah, blah, blah," her father says.

"Have you got anything to eat?" the coyote asks.

"Would you like a carrot?"

"I was thinking of something more like a sandwich or a slice of cheese pizza."

"There are probably some waffles in the freezer. No one ever eats the waffles. Would you like me to make you one?"

"With butter and syrup?" he asks.

The girl nods.

He licks his lips, he turns his head and licks his shoulder and then his coyote paws. He begins grooming himself.

"Be right back," she says. She goes into the kitchen, opens the freezer, and pulls out the box of waffles.

"I thought you were on a diet," her mother says.

"I am," the girl says, putting the waffles in the toaster, getting the butter, slicing a few strawberries.

"What's this called, breakfast for dinner?"

"Never mind," the girl says, pouring syrup.

"That's all you ever say."

She goes back outside. A naked young woman sits by the edge of the pool.

"Is it still you?" the girl asks.

"Yes," the coyote says.

She hands the coyote the plate. "Usually we have better choices, but the housekeeper is on vacation."

"Yum, Eggos. Want a bite?"

The girl shakes her head. "I'm on a diet," she says, getting back onto her raft.

The coyote eats. When she's finished she licks the plate. Her tongue is incredibly long, it stretches out and out and out, lizardly licking.

"Delish," she says.

The girl watches, eyes bulging at the sight of the tongue—hot pink. The coyote starts to change again, to shift. Her skin goes dark, it goes tan, deep like honey and then crisper brown, as if it is burning, and then darker still, toward black. Downy feathers start to appear, and then longer feathers, like quills. Her feet turn orange, fold in, and web. A duck, a big black duck, like a dog, but a duck. The duck jumps into the pool, and paddles toward the girl, splashing noisily.

"These feet," she says. "They're the opposite of high heels and still they're so hard to control."

They float in silence.

She sees her sister come out of her room. She watches the three of them, her mother, father, and sister, through the glass.

She floats on the raft.

Relaxed, the duck extends her neck, her feathers bleach white, and she turns into a swan, circling gracefully.

Suddenly, she lifts her head, as if alerted. She pumps her wings. She is heavy, too heavy to be a swan. Her body is changing again, she is trading her feathers for fur, a black mask appears around her eyes, her bill becomes a snout. She is out of the water, standing on the flagstone, a raccoon with orange webbed feet. She waddles off into the night.

Below ground there is a shift, a fissure, a crack that ricochets. A tremor. The house lights flicker. The alarm goes off. In the pool the water rolls, a small domestic tidal wave sweeps from one end to the other, splashing onto the stones.

The sliding glass door opens, her father steps out, flashlight circling the water. He finds her holding onto the ladder.

"You all right?" he asks.

"Fine," she says.

"Come on out now," he says. "It's enough for one day. You're a growing girl—you need your beauty sleep."

She climbs out of the pool.

Her father hands her a towel. "It's a wonder you don't just shrivel up and disappear." ◆

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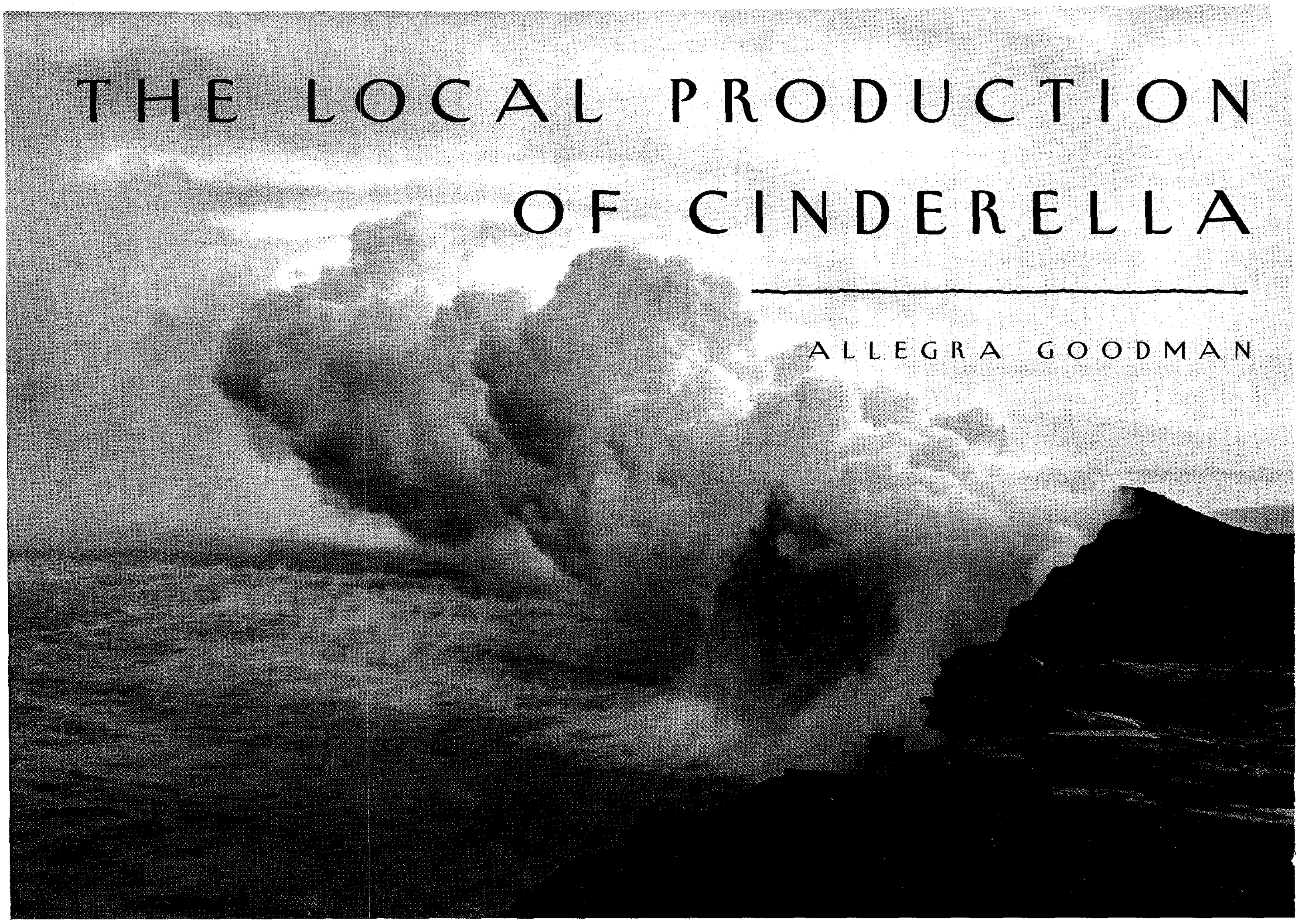

LEN JENSHEL, "HAWAII VOLCANOES NATIONAL PARK"

ALLEGRA GOODMAN

YOU couldn't tell anymore that they had separate desks. For fifteen years, Roselva and Helen had worked together at H.D.H.S., the Hawaii Department of Human Services, and their two gray steel desks, pushed together in the Great Hall of the State Administration Building, were covered with layers of notes and client files and forms to be filled out. This was in 1978, and they worked on twin sea-foam-green I.B.M. Selectric typewriters.

Roselva was Chinese-Hawaiian-Portuguese. She was a religious woman and attended Calvary-by-the-Sea Church. Her skin was deeply tanned, her short hair smooth and black. Her features were soft, as were her brown eyes. She had a gentle face, and was always patient with her clients, whether they were runaways or battered wives, drug-addicted mothers or schizophrenic homeless people. She believed in her job; she believed in human services. Helen, on the other hand, had grown up on the mainland, in Maine, and was of German-Lutheran ancestry. Her skin was fair, her eyes dark. Her voice was weary. She talked all the time about how she wanted to leave social work and do something for herself—music or fine cooking or writing. The clients depressed her. She thought some people were just bad.

Of all the teams in the Great Hall, Roselva and Helen had been together the longest. They were true partners as they sifted the stacks of paperwork before them; effortlessly, they plucked forms from their shared mess. Often they took brown bags from their desk drawers and ate lunch together while they worked. On easy days, or after home visits, they ate outside, sitting on a dark-green bench in Tamarind Park. In the enormous shade of a monkeypod tree, they would talk about Helen's daughters and Roselva's son, Thad, about their husbands, and about cleaning house.

On this day at the end of May, walking back to the office after lunch, they crossed South Beretania Street while they talked about Roselva's big night coming up. Thad's girlfriend, Clarysse, was a ballet major at Chaminade University of Honolulu, and that night she was going to dance the title role in "Cinderella." Everyone was going—Roselva's family, and Clarysse's. Helen and her husband, Sid, had tickets, too.

"I'm so nervous," Roselva confessed.

"Why?" asked Helen. "You don't have to get up and dance onstage."

"I'm nervous for Clarysse," Roselva said. "When she gets up there, I'm going to get butterflies for sure. She's my daughter, practically."

Helen sighed. For six years, Thad and Clarysse had been planning to get married. "Have they set a new date?" Helen asked.

"No," Roselva said. "I think her parents—"

"Yeah, they're pigs," Helen said. She often finished Roselva's sentences, although not with the words Roselva would have chosen. "She's still holding out for the big wedding, huh? Or maybe she doesn't really want to marry Thad."

"Of course she does!"

All around them, lawyers in suits

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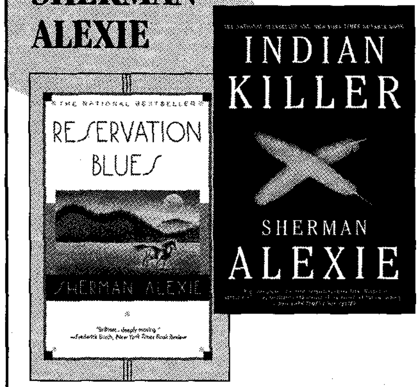

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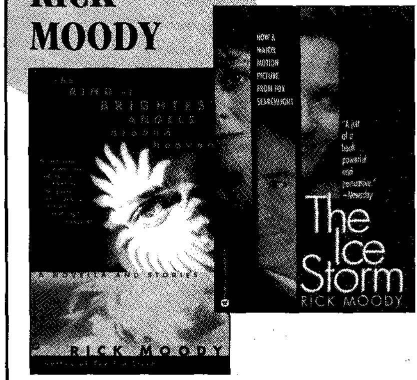

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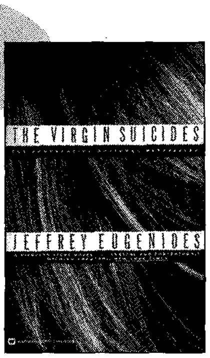

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were streaming back to work. Men in aloha shirts and dress pants were walking up the steps to the state capitol building, with its open crater roof.

"Maybe they'll elope," Helen said.

Roselva was distracted. She was feeling guilty. That morning, she had read some of Helen's private writing. She had not done anything so clearly wrong since she was a child. She had come in to work a few minutes early, and put her purse in the file drawer, the way she always did. She began sorting through the papers in the "in" box, and there among them was a letter from Helen. It was written in black ink on the good heavyweight bond paper. But it wasn't a letter to Roselva, or to anyone in particular. It was addressed, "Dear People of Hawaii." Roselva looked away. Then she glanced back. She hesitated just a moment. And then, in the empty Department of Human Services, she read the whole thing. Then she read it again. It made her queasy, but she couldn't stop. It was a cuckoo letter. Some kind of scary joke. This could not be Helen's writing, she thought. And yet it was her handwriting. This was not the Helen she knew. She wanted to hide the letter somewhere, stuff it away where she couldn't see it. But she put it back where she'd found it, among the pink, yellow, and white forms on the desk.

The letter still sat there when they returned from lunch. Maybe it was a warning sign. Maybe it was a plea for help. In which case Roselva should speak up. That was what she always told her clients' families: first ask if anything is wrong.

As soon as Helen got up to go to the ladies' room, Roselva scooted forward in her swivel chair and slid the letter out once more.

Dear People of Hawaii:

The missionaries came to Hawaii in their Victorian dresses, whalebones and jet buttons. Imagine the black dresses soaking up the heat.

Missionaries planted roses—a buffet for gnats and slugs, caterpillars and aphids, not to mention black mold.

Now the universities plant their sick ideas. People of Hawaii, professors spread their ideology over you each day. They twist your history. Why do you sit silently in the valleys? Why do you sit patiently in the classrooms? Cut the white men down whether from New York or Michigan. Cut them down and plant them. Let them become succulent plants, night-blooming cereus blossoming under the moon. Heads of coral for the reef fish.

O People of Hawaii, I see your shopping malls and hotel luaus but then I see your revolution. A red tide, a taste of salt.

A new Queen rises in the fountain at the foot of Diamond Head. She wears a twelve-strand necklace of braided human hair, and a pendant of polished ivory. She outlaws ukuleles and slack-key guitars. But will the people rise up from their lei stands by the airport and romp across the asphalt back to the green valleys to reclaim their taro patches? Will you leave the front desks at the hotels and go back to plait pili grass and hold your ancient games? Stick throwing, javelin, smooth black rock bowling, and wrestling.

Without knowing it, Roselva had begun to read this letter aloud to herself. "The Queen will die," she whispered. "The dolphins will rise up and circle each island. The tide will come in up to the mountaintops. Hotels will dissolve like sand castles. In catamarans the children will sail from Pearl Harbor, gliding over sunken battleships. Honolulu will become a lost city, whales swishing through lobbies. Green sea turtles nosing empty rooms. The great white shark with pinpoint eyes will swim through sunken streets. There will be no humans left but bones and graves under the water."

What was this? What was this writing? It was like a love letter never sent. Or a speech Helen never gave. It was a crazy letter, some kind of crazy story. But Helen never acted crazy in real life. She was sarcastic in real life, always talking about her husband, Sid, who taught at the university, and their three teen-age daughters. The professor and the princesses, she called them. Helen was cynical, maybe, but she'd never said a word about the old Hawaii. She talked about the old movies at the Honolulu Academy of Arts—Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers. This letter wasn't Helen. And the place Helen described—the turtles and water? What was that place? Not Honolulu.

"Let me give you a piece of advice," Helen said.

Roselva practically jumped out of her chair. Helen was back from the ladies' room. "Advice?" she asked.

"If you really want the kids to get married, offer to pay for the wedding."

Helen was talking about Thad and

Clarysse, but Roselva's mind was still with the dolphins and the rising tide. That afternoon, she hung back a little until Helen left. She gathered up the letter along with the other papers on the desk and put the whole pile in her silk-screened orchid-pattern canvas tote bag.

ROSELVA'S house was hot. She and her husband, Jimmy, lived in Niu Valley, and they had glassed in the lanai in the back. They had wanted a den, but they got a greenhouse effect. A ranch with three bedrooms and two plumeria trees in front, it was a tract house like every other one in the flat bottom of the valley. Roselva pulled up after work and parked her Dodge Omni in the carport. The car had a pyramidal sign on the roof, with "Student Driver" on one side and "Jimmy's Auto School" on the other. This was her husband's business, and his car, a green 1975 Pontiac, had a similar sign on its roof.

Indoors, Roselva opened the jalousies to cool down the living room and kitchen. Thad was already home. Jimmy would be next. The dance performance was that night, and her best friend was turning crazy on her. As if she didn't have enough to worry about. Of course, who told her to go around reading other people's private mail?

She stood at the counter, her brain zinging. She tried to cool down and watch Thad eat. He was wearing gym shorts and an ancient T-shirt printed "13th Annual Haleiwa Surfing Classic." Long ago, Clarysse's parents, Edwin and Mitsuko, had announced that they were never going to pay for any wedding between Clarysse and Thad. Clarysse's parents tolerated Thad, but they did not approve of him. They thought their daughter should marry someone with a career like law or medicine, who could support a ballerina daughter. Clarysse's father owned a pool-cleaning-supplies store, and her mother taught the art of ikebana.

Thad bolted down his chicken and rice. He got up to look for a glass, then leaned over and drank from the kitchen tap as if it were a water fountain.

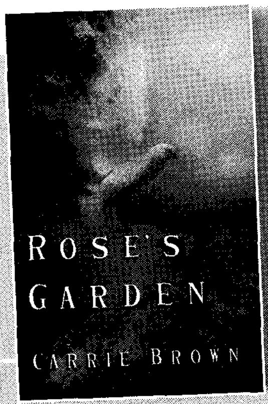
"Thad," Roselva said.

"Gotta go, Mom," he told her.

"It's still early yet," she said.

"Call is six o'clock!" he told her. He ran out to the driveway and started up Roselva's car. He was taking Clarysse

Make time for great summer reading.



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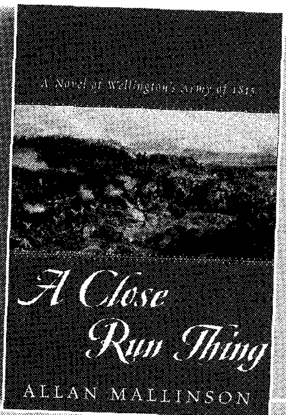

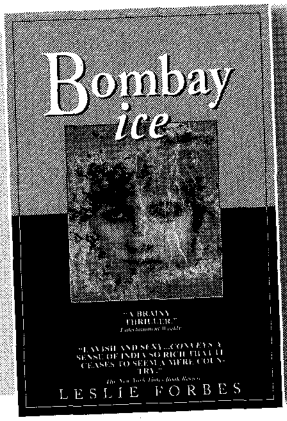

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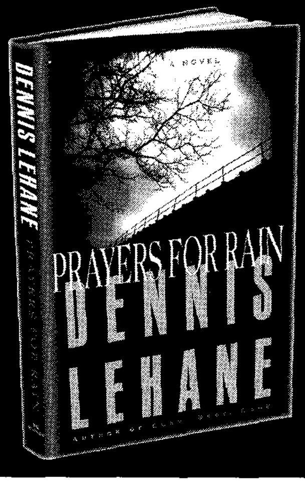

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The heavy-lidded enterprise of the dead
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Like smoke, so thick at first but higher
just a wisp, until it is indistinguishable

from air. The move from youth to old age,
doesn't it resemble falling, a leaf descending
from white birch to front lawn? You think
it drifts slowly? It plummets. And this well-

dressed elderly man crossing against the light.
At the curb he puts a hand to his chest. He feels
a fluttering which suggests the birth of angels:
a sudden consciousness, the thrashing of wings.

—STEPHEN DOBYNS

down to the Chaminade University theatre.

Any minute, Jimmy would come home. Roselva changed into a deep-green muumuu. She tried to read the newspaper. She opened the refrigerator and checked on the leis for Clarysse: a three-strand lei of pink Maui rosebuds and a matching haku lei of pink rosebuds, tiny orchids, and ferns, woven into a garland. The leis rested on damp paper towels in their clear plastic boxes.

The door slammed. It was Jimmy, in the living room. She heard him take his keys and wallet and smash them down onto the coffee table. She knew exactly what had happened. Jeannine Chung had failed her driving test. Patiently, painstakingly, Jimmy had been teaching this student, and had brought her along to a point where she was ready to take the exam. More than ready: prepared to ace that driving test. Jimmy had brought her to the D.M.V., let her take his driving-school car out on the test drive with the state examiner, gently pushed his student out of the nest—and the kid had flopped. Randall or Mike or one of the other examiners—Jimmy knew them all—had shuddered in the car and screamed at Jeannine, "*Never* do that. Never, *never* do that. Return to the testing station. Get out of the vehicle. Zero. You flunk!" Jimmy was Jeannine's instructor, and he was disgraced. Roselva knew how hard this hit him. He was the most careful teacher in the world. He never took a student to the D.M.V. until he or she was a perfect driver. But once in a while it all went wrong. Jimmy's flawless student driver would get to the test and fall apart. Panic while turning left into traffic. Fail to line up properly while parking. Block an intersection and turn into a snivelling mess.

Jimmy didn't say a word while they ate dinner. He didn't speak as they got into his car and drove to Chaminade. Roselva wanted to tell him what she'd done, and ask his advice. But she knew better than to open her mouth.

The car jerked ahead in the rush-hour traffic. Tight-lipped, Jimmy accelerated to catch the tail end of a green light. They lurched forward. "Stop that!" Jimmy said to Roselva.

"Stop what?" she asked. Then she looked down at her feet. Without realizing it she had been correcting Jimmy's driving with the car's specially added instructional passenger-side brake. Jimmy used the brake all the time to curb his wayward driving students, but he couldn't stand it when Roselva used the brake on him.

When they got to Chaminade, Jimmy let her out in front of the white, Spanish-style auditorium and drove off to park. Thad was waiting outside the auditorium door, and Roselva gave him the leis for Clarysse. Then she gave the usher her ticket and opened the door to the auditorium. The place was chilly, full of expectant talk. She went down the center aisle, past rows full of people. She was looking for Clarysse's parents, or for empty seats, but all she found were rows filled with strangers, and seats that were saved with programs folded over their backs. Then she heard someone calling her from down front.

"Roselva!" Helen was standing there, in the center of the third row. She had saved seats for her and Jimmy. Thad was there already, sitting next to her. Sid hadn't been able to come, Helen said.

"Thanks." Roselva squeezed in next to Helen. "Jimmy's parking. Oh, there he is." Her voice was breathy; she was so nervous. She should say something to Helen. She should speak up right now. The red velvet curtain loomed in front of her. The lights went down. She felt a sympathetic stagefright. When Jimmy took his seat she said a silent prayer. Lord Jesus, help us. Help Clarysse dance. And forgive me for what I did today. Show me the way.

Music started up from speakers in the wings. The curtains parted and the Chaminade dance majors appeared. Roselva had to put her glasses on in a hurry. The dancers jumped and pranced to the strains of Prokofiev, some more graceful and some less so, the women sometimes tall and willowy, in their tights and tutus, but sometimes short, with big thighs. Roselva's seat was excellent, almost too good. She could see the sweat trickling on the ballerinas' faces, glistening in their hair. When the dancers spun and turned, sweat flew off them as if they had been swimming and had just sprung out of the water.

Helen nudged Roselva. There was Clarysse. Her body was slender and her skin fair. Her makeup made her look almost European. She had blushing pink cheeks and wide, blue-shadowed eyes. In her costume of gold lace, she descended the grand staircase at the ball. Her black hair was beautifully pinned up, her head suddenly small.

When Clarysse danced with her prince, she became more ordinary. The prince was a paid ringer from the Honolulu Opera Theatre, and he had a distant, professional manner. He looked less like an ardent lover than

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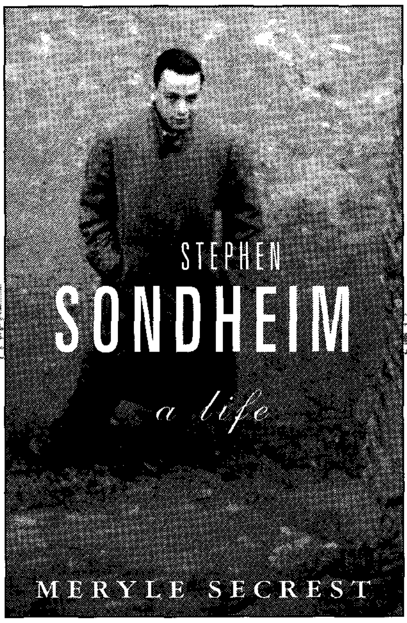

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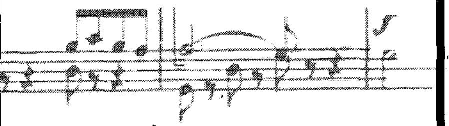

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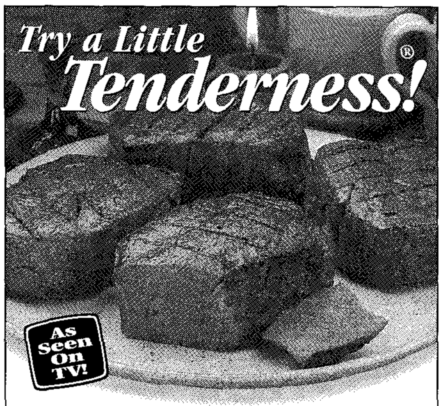

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like a seasoned horse trainer as he led Clarysse this way and that. Her toe shoes clopped delicately on the wood floor of the stage as he took her through her paces. Oh, poor Thad, Roselva thought. What was he going to do with a dance major? How was he ever going to support her? But then, when Clarysse went into a solo, Roselva almost forgot her worries. When she sprang up in the air and beat her pointed feet, Roselva cheered silently against gravity. Even when Clarysse landed on the ground, she fell back lightly. She was on the verge of flying. Any second it was going to happen—Clarysse would become a princess and a bride, the fairy-tale star of her dream wedding.

ALL the way home, Roselva wished she had spoken to Helen. There Helen had been all evening, sitting and applauding with her. She had come to Clarysse's performance and sat at Roselva's side. And what had Roselva done? Only betrayed her colleague, her friend of fifteen years. In the car, Roselva couldn't stop thinking about Helen's words. The missionaries in their Victorian dresses. White men becoming succulent plants. What was that all about?

"Jimmy," she said. "You notice anything about Helen?"

"No," he said.

A red tide and a taste of salt, she thought. The white shark with pinpoint eyes.

AT home in their bedroom, Roselva changed into her nightgown. Jimmy was lying in his underwear watching the news. His eyes were half closed.

"Helen wrote a letter," Roselva said. "I never should have read it, but—I'm worried she's sick. You think she's sick?" She tapped her head.

Jimmy didn't answer.

Roselva turned off the television. In a flash Jimmy opened his eyes. "I was watching that," he said.

"Can I show you this?" Roselva took Helen's letter from her bag. She handed Jimmy his reading glasses and he read. He read the whole thing in silence, then handed it back.

"You sure that's Helen's?" he said.

"It's her handwriting," Roselva said.

"Maybe she copied it."

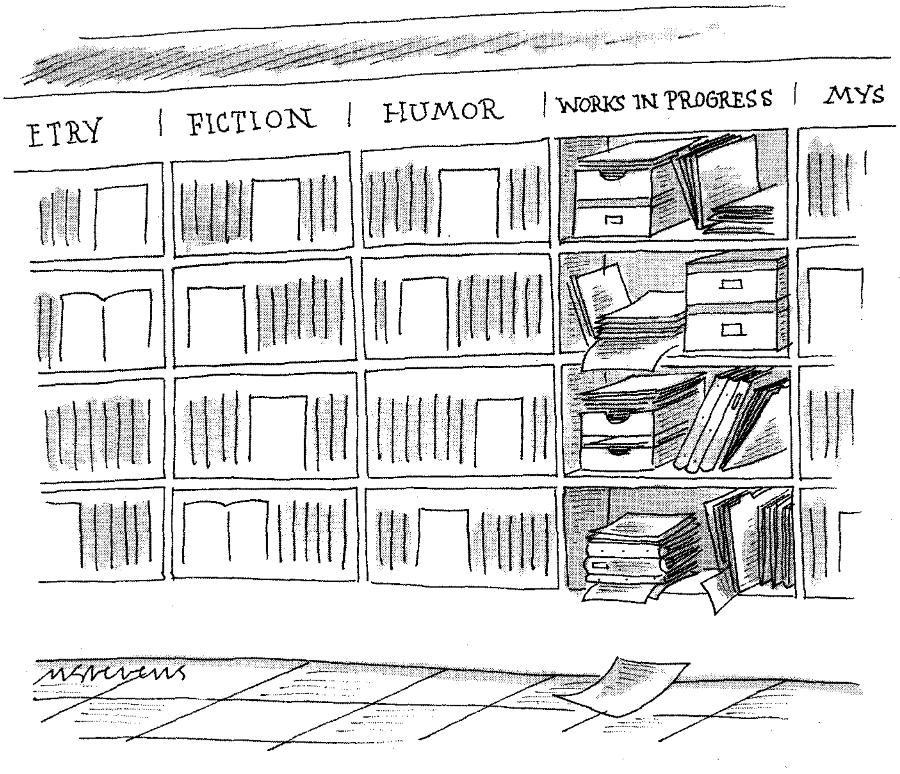
"Where would she copy something like that from?"

Jimmy shrugged.

"I just found it on the desk," Roselva said, "and now I can't figure out what to do."

"Put it back," Jimmy suggested.

"And what if it's some kind of call for help?"



"We just saw her," Jimmy said. He had turned on the news again. His eyes were starting to close.

Roselva bent her head down close to the words in the letter. Then she had an inspiration. "Jimmy," she said. "This letter is a prophecy."

"Prophecy for what?"

"For the future," Roselva said. Her voice was hushed. "Look," she said. "The dolphins will rise up. The water will cover the city. There will be no humans left."

Jimmy opened his eyes. "What type prophecy is that?" he said.

"Armageddon type," Roselva replied. She lay down on the bed. For the first time that day, she felt some relief.

As soon as she came in on Monday morning, Roselva saw the newspaper clippings on the desk. Helen had clipped the review from her copy of the Sunday paper:

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>
> Chaminade University's spring offering, "Cinderella," sparkled with innovative choreography, energetic dancing, and dazzling costumes.
>
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"'Verve,'" Helen said to Roselva. "Not bad."

"Not too shabby," Roselva agreed.

"But you have to wonder what she's going to do with herself after graduation."

Roselva stared at Helen. "That's exactly what I was thinking at the performance."

"Poor Thad," Helen said.

"Poor Thad! That's just what I was thinking." Roselva shook her head.

But Helen was already at the steel file cabinet, gathering folders. They had a visit out on the North Shore. A homeless Tongan family camped out on the beach. Roselva felt sad whenever they drove out there. The family tent leaked. Mr. Tafesau was always trying to use the pay phone up the road to look for work trimming trees.

"Don't you start getting down already," Helen said, looking over at her.

"I can't believe it," Roselva whispered. "You've been reading my mind."

"Oh, Roselva, quit it." Helen took out her car keys.

"I mean, I read your letter." Roselva took it out of her bag and placed it on Helen's desk. "I'm sorry," she said.

For just a second Helen was taken aback. Then she shrugged. "My shrink says I should write. He says I have a lot of anger. I'm working on that."

"You're blessed," Roselva said.

"Yeah, I guess," Helen said. "I'm blessed with a lousy marriage, scum for clients, a daughter sleeping with her entire senior class."

"You're blessed with prophecy," Roselva said. "You see how it's all going to be."

"Oh, Roselva," Helen said. "I can't see two steps in front of me."

Roselva shook her head. "Look at this." She picked up Helen's letter. "No more selling leis. Whales in the lobby."

Helen took the letter, crumpled it up, and tossed it in the trash bin next to her desk.

Roselva blinked. She nearly went to fish the letter out again.

"That's just made up," Helen said. "None of that's going to happen."

"No, no," Roselva insisted. "You have the gift, you know the future."

"Fine. If you believe that kind of thing. It's like you believe in angels and Heaven and Hell."

"I do," Roselva said.

Helen shrugged. "O.K. I'm not going to argue with you."

"And what do you believe?"

"When you're dead, you're dead," Helen said. "That's the beauty of it. You just stop."

"And then what?"

"Then nothing."

"I can't believe that's true."

"That's why they invented Heaven," Helen said.

"It's not," Roselva said.

"O.K., whatever you say," said Helen. "Listen, if you get up there, I'll go with you."

"But not too soon," Roselva said.

"It'll be like this," Helen said, and she leaned close. Roselva looked at her earnestly—just a little bit on guard, since Helen loved to make fun. And Helen said in her weary, half-serious voice, "We'll grow very old. And then we'll go to Heaven in clouds of smoke. Or to the shark palace. Wherever we go we'll kick off our shoes, and it'll all be the same. I'm still going to be working with you." ◆

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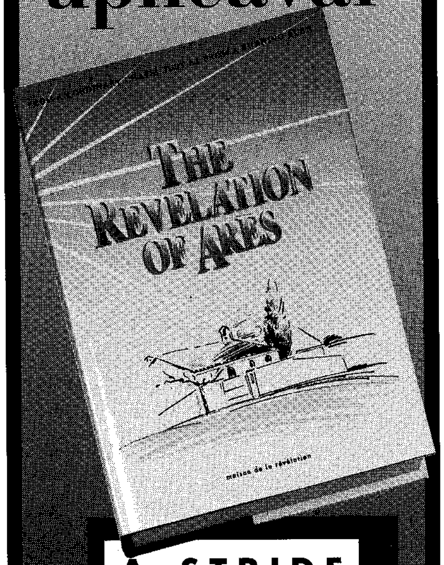

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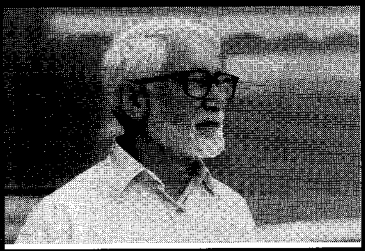

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THE SAVIORS

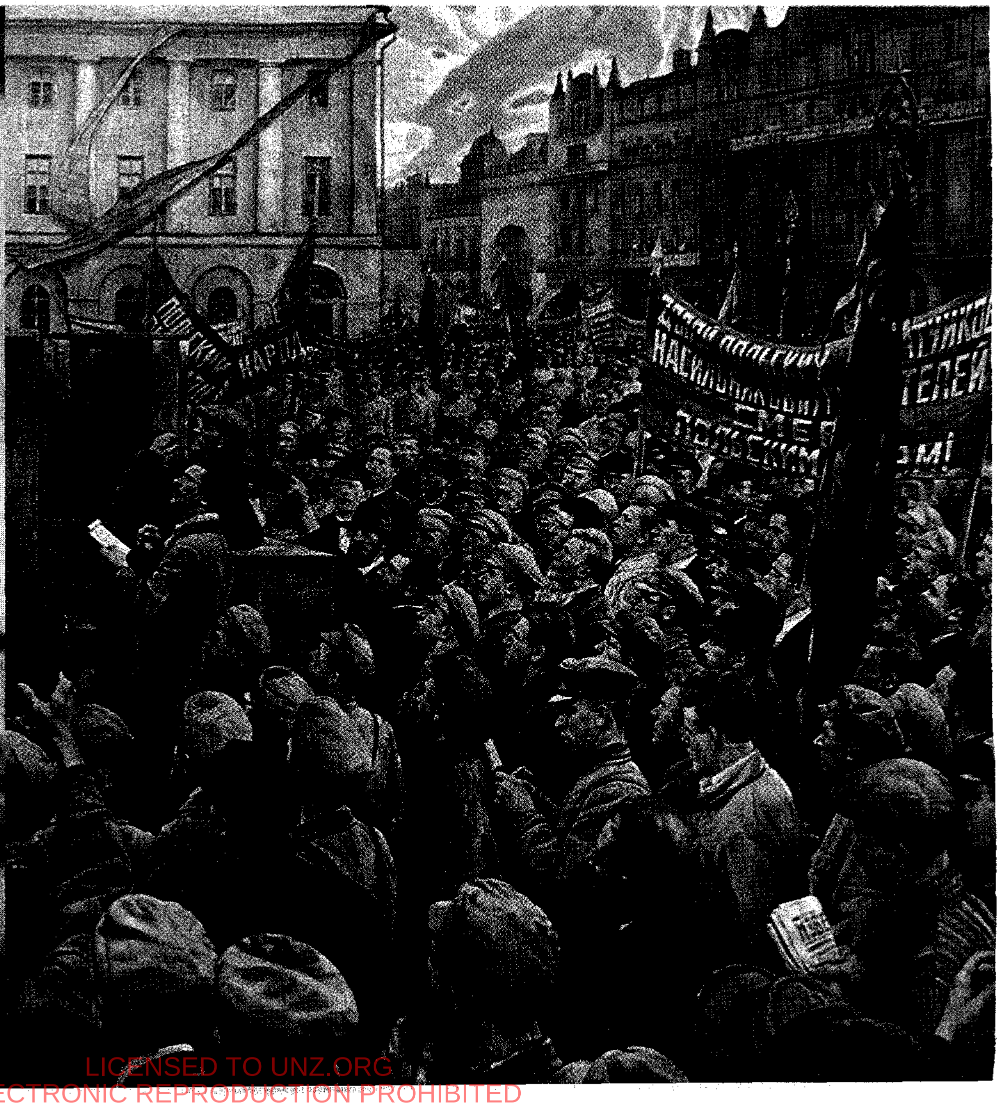
WILLIAM T. VOLLMANN

The tale of Fanya Kaplan, that dark-haired, pale-faced, slender idealist, tells itself with a grim brevity, in keeping with her times. Between exploit and recompense lay only four days, and at the close of that interval Fanya Kaplan was carried beyond *tav,* the final letter of the magic alphabet. Her attempt on Lenin's life took place on August 30, 1918. It is written that after Lenin fell the young would-be assassin tried to flee, but then, remembering that the moral code of the Social Revolutionaries required her to give up her life in exchange for her victim's, she stopped running, turned back, and in trembling silence surrendered to the security forces. On September 3rd, Fanya Kaplan, who coincidentally was noted for her "Jewish features," was led into a narrow courtyard of the Lubyanka and shot from behind by the commandant of the Kremlin himself, P. D. Malkov.

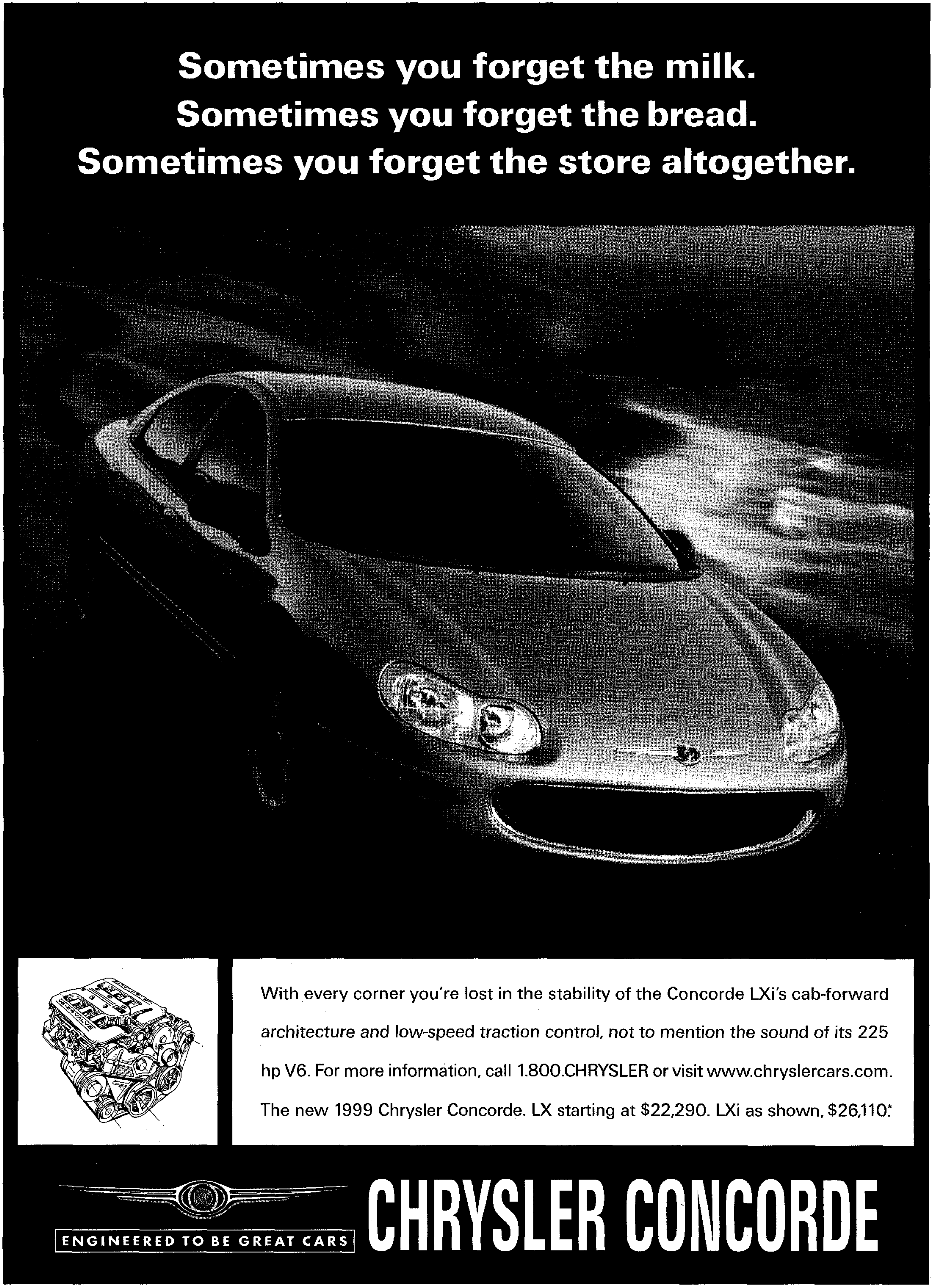
The tale of Lenin's bride, Nadezhda Konstantinovna Krupskaya, makes for a happier parable. Were it not for her nearly accidental marriage, for instance, she would surely have remained as hidden to history as the silent letter *aleph.* What was she, then, in her maiden days? We don't want to call her a cipher; call her instead the darling of parable-mongers—introduce her as *the perfect personification of convention.* Trotsky patronized her; Stalin by the end commanded her; Lenin himself merely used her. Historians regard her as a faithful mediocrity. Unutterably typical of her epoch—and thus perhaps curiously akin to Fanya Kaplan—she was agitated all her life by *fervor.* Just as the same letter may appear in two words of contrary meaning, so the lives of those two women write themselves in nearly identical characters. Who am I to find in Krupskaya's enthusiasms anything alien to Fanya Kaplan's? One loved the Revolution; the other hated it. What force transformed them into opposites, if they *were* opposites?

We read that Lenin's future bride was first (that is, before her parable is supposed to begin) a pious little girl who prayed to the icon in her bedroom, and then a rapturous Tolstoyan. In the company of her friends, Krupskaya attacked a wealthy factory owner with snowballs. We find her, at age fifteen, cutting hay for hostile and uncomprehending peasants, then, at twenty-two, teaching night classes in literacy to factory workers. She was one of those souls who long more than anything else to be of use in this world. Unknowingly, she found herself drawn to the letter *cheth,* which resembles the Greek letter *pi,* and which, visually representing a gate, refers to ownership. She yearned to give herself, to be possessed, to know where she stood.

By the time she was twenty-six, she was receiving, materializing, and



LEFT: PHOTOGRAPH OF N.K. KRUPSKAYA, SOVFOTO; RIGHT: DAVID KING COLLECTION, LONDON



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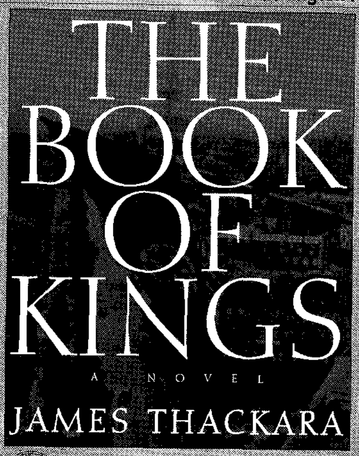

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carrying to underground printers the invisible-inked manifestos that Lenin sent from prison. The legend says that one of her greatest joys was to watch the magic letters appear in the boiling water, as if they composed a secret message written expressly for her, instead of being merely another metallically impersonal appeal to the workers. When she reached the age of twenty-seven, N. K. Krupskaya was arrested for the first time. After she had spent two months in preliminary detention, the authorities released her, thinking her a shy nobody who'd got mixed up in illegal activity by mistake, but so brazen and exalted were her actions on behalf of the Kostroma strikers that she was arrested again after only eighteen days.

Here I am reminded of that pallid, protuberant-featured Social Revolutionary who sought to kill Lenin. It's said that Fanya Kaplan had become a committed anarcho-terrorist by the time she was sixteen. When the gendarmes burst in, she and her comrades were arrayed around the bed, carefully assembling the components of a bomb. Fearing for the Tsar's safety, the court at first condemned her to death, but in view of her youth and sex the sentence was commuted to hard labor for life in Siberia. There she dwelled between the river ice and the celestial alphabets of the constellations until the October Revolution granted her amnesty. By then, Fanya Kaplan was more determined than ever to redeem Russia from centralist abomination.

As for Comrade Krupskaya, who proved equally unrepentant, she was kept in the blankness of the cells for five months, until a convict named M. F. Vetrova burned herself to death to protest her own imprisonment. Embarrassed by Vetrova's propaganda triumph, the authorities felt compelled to show their remaining female prisoners the same leniency they had granted to Fanya Kaplan. In March of 1897, not long after her twenty-eighth birthday, Krupskaya was released on grounds of failing health. A photograph from this period reveals her pale, stern beauty. Her smooth forehead glows like winter sun on a snowy field, her clenched lips cannot entirely deny their own sensuousness, and her eyes gaze with painful sincerity into the ideal—dark eyes these, longing eyes, which seem steadfastly to crave meaning. She's a recruit, a fighter, a militant.

Knowing that Lenin needed a copyist in his Siberian exile, and learning that she, too, would be exiled, Krupskaya accepted her leader's proposal for a marriage of convenience, replying in those famous words, meant to show her imperviousness to bourgeois institutions: *Well, so what. If as a wife, then as a wife.* In fact there is every reason to believe that beneath this bravado lived an idolatrous passion. Upon her arrival in Siberia the following year, the reunited atheists submitted to a full church wedding in Shushenskoe, which is wistfully called the Siberian Italy.

The law required an exchange of rings; and devotees of that most Kabbalistic genre the parable-within-a-parable might well concentrate on this most pathetic episode of the ceremony, unable to resist the ironic symbolism of the two copper wedding bands lying side by side on a black velvet cushion. It's said that when the eternally virginal Krupskaya first saw the rings she blushed. Freshly worked copper has a peculiar brightness, like bloody gold. In their shape the rings are said to have resembled the letter *samekh*—a sort of O that tapers as it rejoins its starting point, and sports a tiny bud on top, which brides imagine as a precious stone. Need I add that this character of the mystical alphabet symbolizes both help and sleep?

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Who knows the fate of those shining circlets? The ring that Krupskaya slipped upon Lenin's finger was never seen again. As for the one he slid onto hers, she removed it immediately, for the sake of revolutionary convention. Then the ceremony was over, and they walked home by separate ways.

So she became both drudge and disciple, the good soldier, the bedfellow (occasional bedfellow, I should say, for in their Kremlin suite each spouse had a private room and a single-width metal-framed bed), the harmless mediocrity, the liquidator of pessimism, the amateur who transcribed Lenin's essays and sewed his nightshirts. He called her Nadya. She called him Volodya.

On that final August day two decades later, when the dark-haired, pale-faced, slender woman approached Lenin's Rolls-Royce, then took shaky aim with her little Browning, the supreme deity of the Soviet Union was supposed to be gathered in once and for all, to rise to the heart of Heaven, just as the letters of the Hebrew alphabet are said to take wing during the course of certain Kabbalistic raptures. Certainly Fanya Kaplan (alias Dora) was banking on it when she gave herself up in observance of the covenant *A life for a life.* But Kaplan, a member in good standing of the Social Revolutionary Combat Organization, lacked competence. What else should we expect? So many revolutionaries are intellectuals, people whose aspirations tend to run ahead of their capabilities. Just think of that Paris Communard of the previous century who used to sit in cafés constructing such beautiful little barricades out of bread crumbs that everyone admired him; came the uprising, he built a perfect barricade out of stones—and the troops marched around it.

With typically hysterical exoticism, Fanya Kaplan had incised her bullets with dumdum crosses so that they represented magic atoms and dipped them in a substance that she believed to be curare poison but which would prove to be completely ineffective. Then she set out to try her luck. As soon as Lenin had completed his Friday address to the workers, she fired three shots, which hummed toward him like the letter *mem.* One bullet pierced a woman who was complaining about the confiscation of bread at railroad stations. The second shot struck Lenin in the upper arm, injuring his shoulder. The third soared upward through his lung into his neck, coming to rest in a fortunate spot (if any bullet wound can be considered such). Lenin's face paled and he sank to the running board, bleeding, unconscious.

The Cheka sent a car for Krupskaya without telling her anything. She was in terror; that day the leading Chekist, Uritsky, had been assassinated. Krupskaya had already begun to suffer from the heart condition that would accompany her through the remaining chapters of her life. She felt half suffocated. Her vision doubled; the streets of Moscow shimmered with tears. When, penetrating the magic circle of Latvian riflemen, she found her husband apparently dying, she composed herself and gripped his hand in silence. (Years later, she'd be dry-eyed at his funeral.)

The doctors had already cut his suit off. Lenin's eyes would not open. He breathed with the desperate, shallow gasps of a lover nearing orgasm; and, as if to reinforce this impression, a curl of blood had dried upon his paper-white chest in the shape of the letter *lamed,* whose snaky form has Kabbalistic associations with sexual intercourse.

To comfort her, one of the nurses (who herself was weeping) said, "He needs you, Nadezhda Konstantinovna." Then they all began to heal him, giving him injections with a squat glass syringe whose shape was reminiscent of the letter *qoph,* emblem of inner sight.

As soon as he came back into his mind, he became impatient. He had so many things to do to insure that his Revolution would be irreversible. Krupskaya rarely found herself alone with him. First it was the doctors, then Trotsky, Stalin, and the rest, come to congratulate him on his survival. He gazed at her half humorously, rolling his eyes. She knew that he longed to be at work by himself, preparing new commandments and testimonies. What could she do to help him? How could she prevent him from tiring himself into a relapse? Shyly clearing her throat, she said, "Pretend this convalescence is only another term in prison, Volodya. You know you can deal with that!" He laughed delightedly.

On September 14th she took him to somebody's confiscated estate in the pleasant village of Gorki. He recovered secretly behind those walls. While he slept, Krupskaya sat in her room, repeating his name with such whispered fervor that the nurses said, "It's almost as if she believes he'll fade away if she closes her eyes for one minute!" They tried to get her to rest, but she burst into tears. By October, he had begun to walk again without her help, although he'd lost much blood and there were circles under his eyes. She brought him home to the Kremlin just before the end of that month, and

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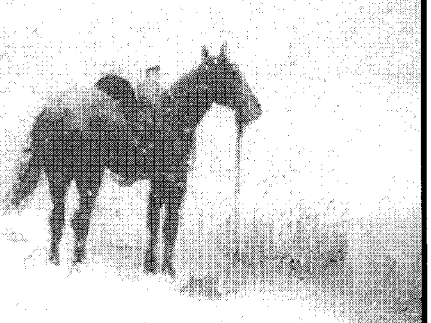

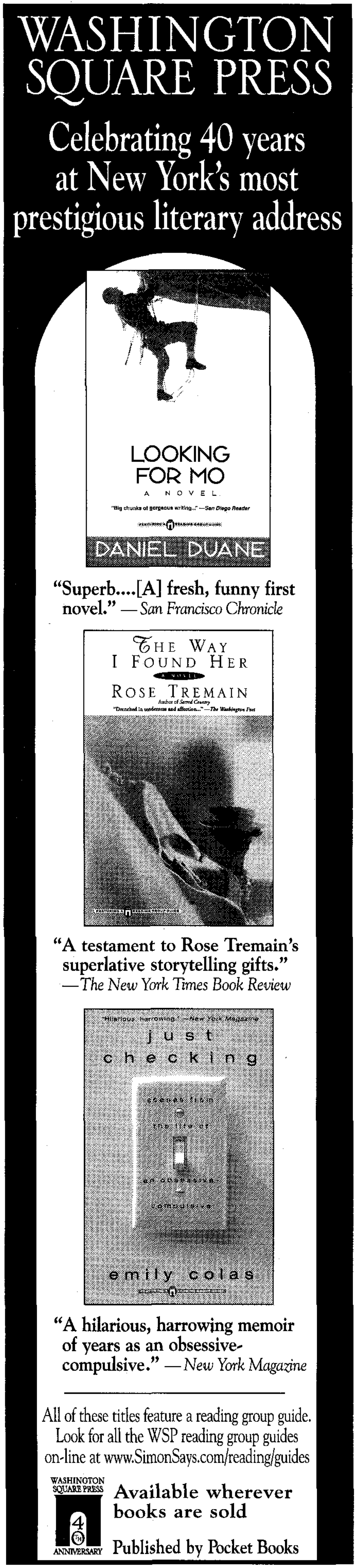

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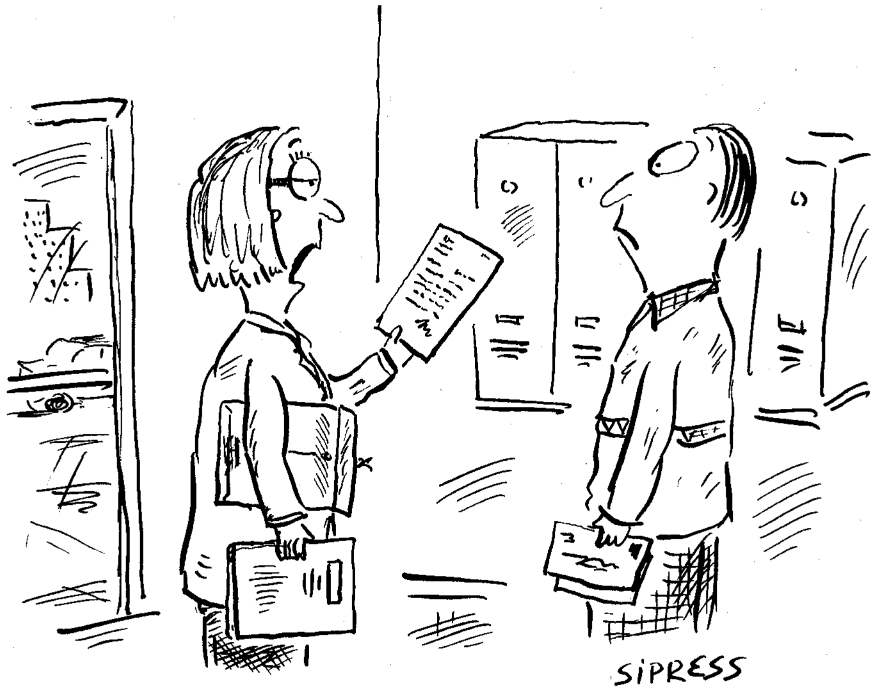

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began sleeping with her door open in case he should call for her. He'd already reverted to his habit of pacing his office on tiptoe through the night, muttering. By November, he was almost entirely restored. (Fanya Kaplan had, as exegetes like to say, "wrought better than she knew," since the bullet remaining in Volodya's neck proved to be a time bomb. Nearly three years later, the doctors decided to remove it and, although the operation was a success, scarcely two days later he suffered the first of the cerebral hemorrhages that were to carry him off.)

FANYA KAPLAN was executed on the same day that the Commissar of the Interior released the infamous "Order Concerning Hostages," which decreed that all Right Social Revolutionaries be arrested immediately and reserved for mass executions as needed. In Perm alone, thirty-six captives were shot to avenge Lenin and Uritsky. Within twenty-four hours, the Red Terror was born. Its birth announcement went hissing across telegraph lines like the letter *shin,* whose three vertical arms culminate in poppy heads of flame. Meanwhile, the press kept calling for more blood, more blood. In the ever-timely words of Comrade N. V. Krylenko (whose own destiny was a shooting): *We must execute not only the guilty. Execution of the innocent will impress the masses even more.*

But, unlike the assassin herself, Krupskaya could not agree that a fellow-revolutionary ought to be put to death.

"The Central Committee will have to decide," her husband said. He knew that Fanya Kaplan's corpse had already been burned and the ashes buried in an unmarked grave.

"Volodya, don't think I'm a conciliationist. During all these thirty years my attitude has not changed."

"I shall consider it."

"I'm so sorry to disturb you about this. I've only taken her case to heart because—"

Slowly raising his bald crown from the outspread *Pravda* that it was his habit to grip in both hands, he gazed at her across the neutral zone of his desk, guarded from her by two inkwells, whose brass caps shone like the domes of Orthodox churches, by his lamp and telephone, and by his long, narrow scissors, whose points faced her.

"Promise me you won't let them do this," pleaded Krupskaya, who, thanks to her thyroid condition, had already developed the protuberant eyes that

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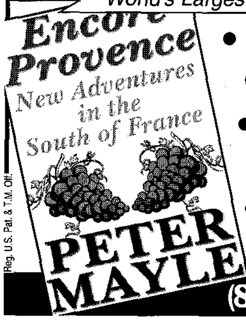

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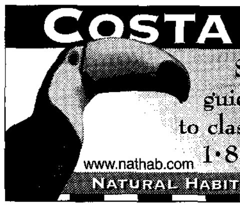

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would give her the nickname "the Fish."

Lenin blinked and said, "Nadya, you know very well that right now our Revolution faces so many dangers."

"I have never asked you for anything. I married you; I let you have your mistress, and I even collaborated with her. Save this woman, Volodya, I beg you!"

Trembling, breathing heavily, she sat down. She was overweight, unhealthy; not long afterward she'd suffer her first heart attack.

Lenin was not undevoted. He had carried milk to his wife when she'd lain in a sanatorium. He had granted her political power in accordance with her abilities. He had also given her a small, ornate desk in the Kremlin, a window view, a sofa flanked by bookcases, a personal library of twenty thousand volumes; these were her luxuries. This was the first and last time she ever asked him for something. And so Lenin called to him Comrade J. V. Stalin, who was so useful in such matters. Stalin smiled angrily and said that it would be taken care of. Lenin's eyes took on their famous ironic twinkle when he said to Stalin, "The actress had better be good. You know that Nadya is not stupid."

A week later, Lenin told his wife, "It's all right. I've made inquiries. You can talk with Kaplan tomorrow. But it's all got to stay top secret. Right now the whole world is against us."

KRUPSKAYA set out for the prison alone, in her stained and dirty peasant dress, with her hair tucked up in a bun. It was snowing, and the streets were dangerous with ice. In those days it was the custom for every pass to be scrutinized in turn by dozens of menacing, half-literate people, none of whom could grant the bearer absolution from fear but any one of whom possessed full authority to shoot. Under the stipulations of the Red Terror, mistaken ruthlessness would be forgiven; mistaken mercy might not. Yet, strangely, the sentry, whose cap was pulled low over his eyes, opened the squeaking gate without demur, and when she descended the stairs she found at the entrance to a labyrinth of brickwork corridors another guard waiting for her, although she never saw anything of him but his back. Silently he led her down an-

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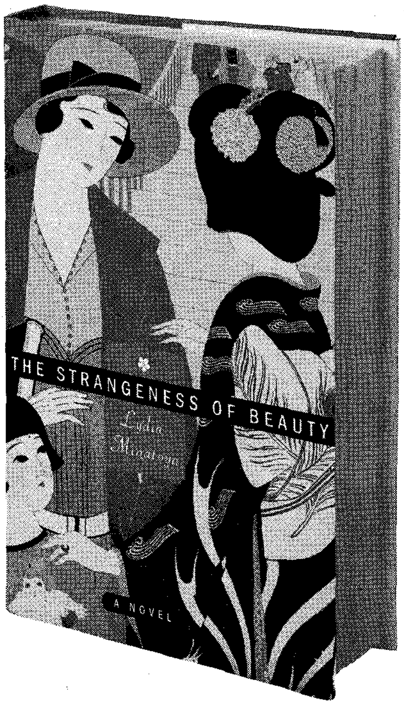

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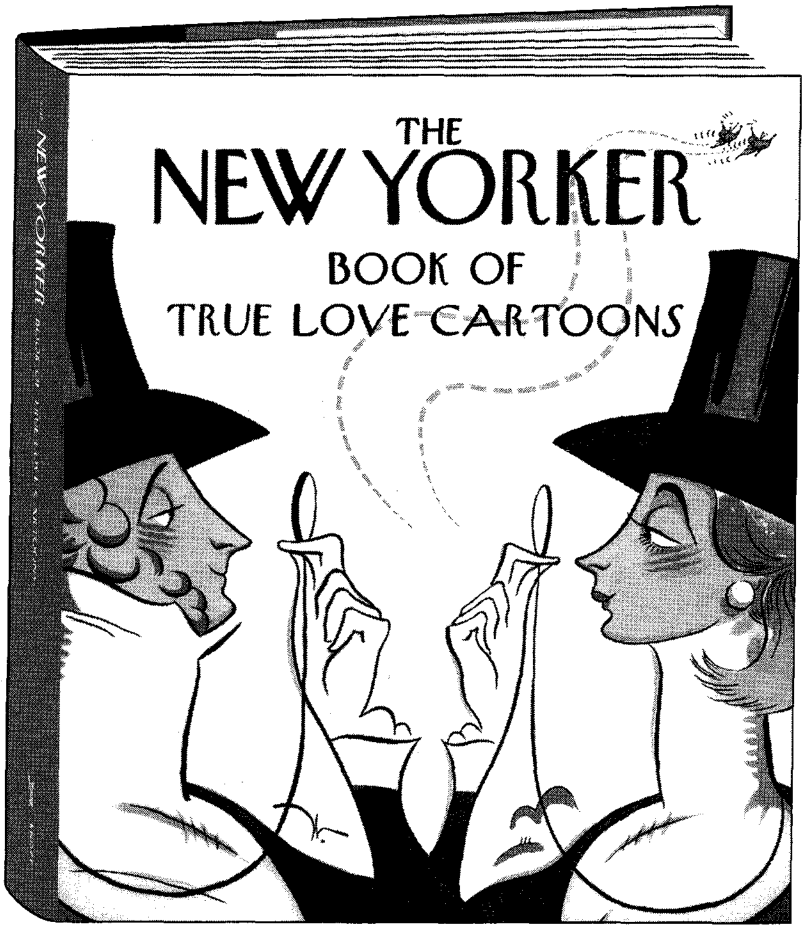
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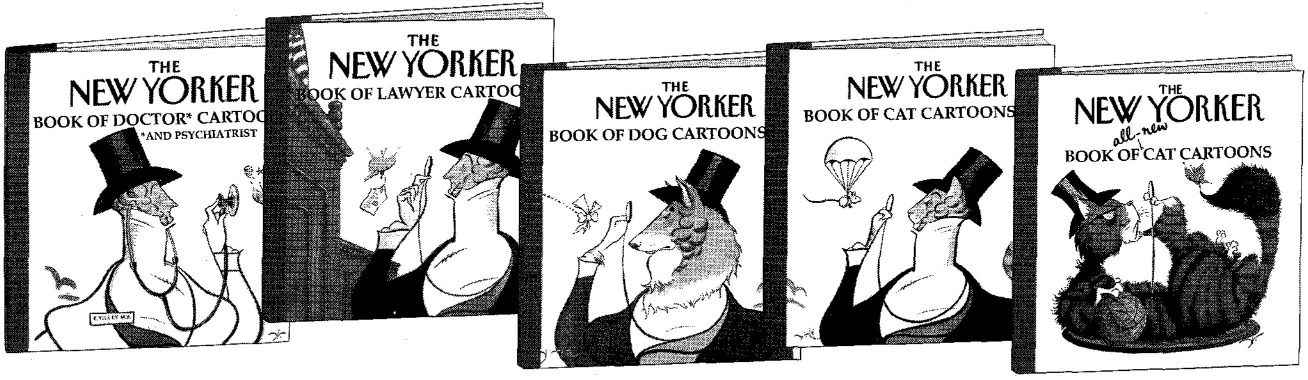
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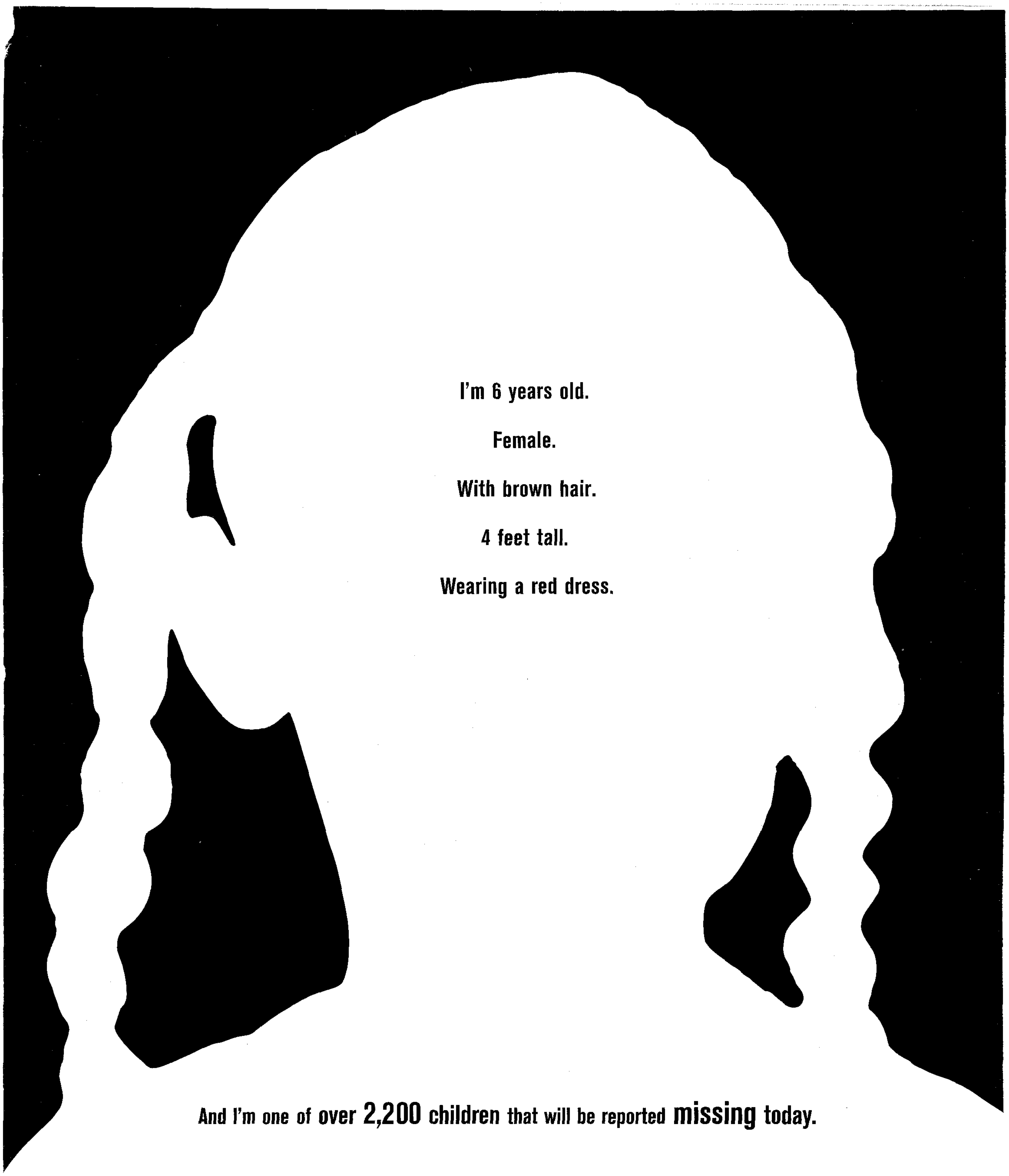
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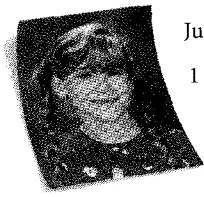

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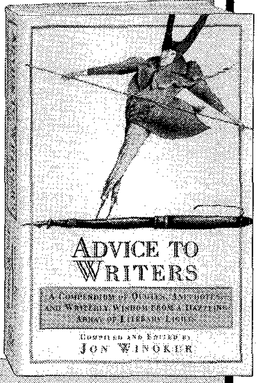
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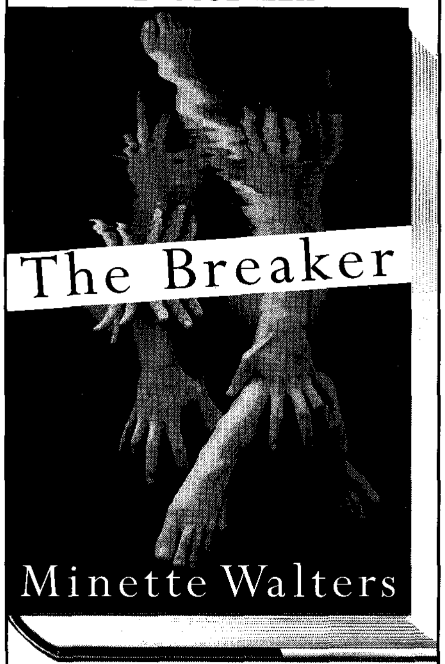

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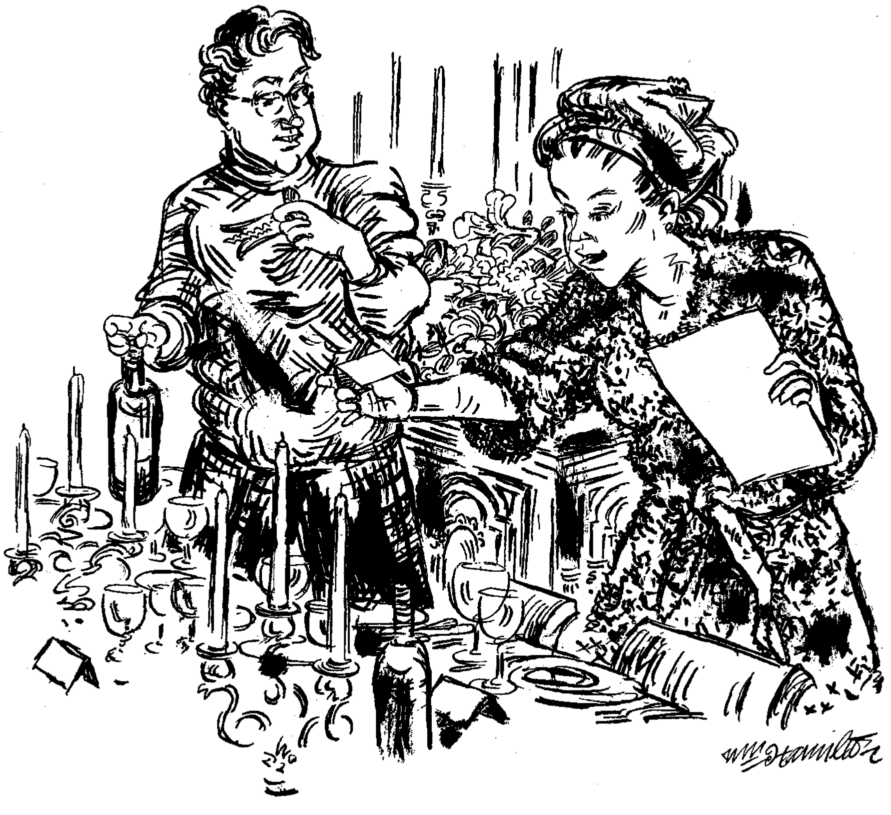
other staircase. Through the walls came rhythmic screams, sometimes muffled by the earth of those deep-sunk grave-wells, sometimes amplified by the ventilation pipes, just as, they say, in classical times the cries of Sicilian victims echoed from the throat of a hollow brazen bull inside which the condemned were slowly roasted. As we know, Krupskaya was a sentimentalist (who among all books secretly preferred Louisa May Alcott's "Little Women"), and these sounds horrified her. But since childhood it had been impossible to unsettle her heavy, melancholy steadiness, which disguised itself as optimism. She trudged on behind the guard, who finally stopped to unlock an ancient iron door with three keys. He stood aside, his face in the shadows, and as soon as she had entered closed the door upon her.

It should have been observable to Krupskaya that the walls of the cell were incised with Hebrew letters, which seemed almost to flutter in the luminescence of the guttering lantern. Of course, she was so long past her religious days as to be blind to the uncanny. After all, what might constitute uncanniness to a devout Bolshevik? The presence of a Social Revolutionary? But why seek out the uncanny? Motivations lie nested in motivations, like the numerological values of the letters of Hebrew parables. Krupskaya needed to prove herself to be so excellent, so above vindictive personalism, that she could forgive even the woman who would have killed her husband-god. Within the coils of this rationale hid a second craving, which she hardly dared to read, a lust for reassurance regarding her Revolution's benignity.

Krupskaya sat with her hand upon the table, gazing drearily upon the prisoner and blinking her tired eyes. Her face was tanned almost to griminess, thanks to all her propaganda work in the open air. Her stringy hair and the two creases between her eyes gave her an urgent, almost crazed expression.

As for the convict, she scarcely deigned to turn upon Krupskaya her half-closed gaze. The visitor took this unceasing coldness, or at least guardedness, to be evidence of guilt. But in her socialist faith, as in her private relations with her husband, she had been so long accustomed to considering individual peculiarities irrelevant that this reticence scarcely affected her. Questions could be answered without "personality" coloring the words: she



"I think they'll be perfect together. He's a journalist and she's a complete composite."

was interested in Fanya Kaplan only insofar as she embodied a force that threatened Krupskaya's interpretation of history.

At last the other woman, half turning away, brushed her hair out of her eyes with a long, pallid hand, cleared her throat, and huskily said, "Well, why did you come?"

Krupskaya replied, "I did not come to save you. I came to understand you. I came to lift a stone from my soul."

"Ah! You speak like a true Russian—so mystical, so emotional."

"And you? You're not Russian?"

"I'm a Jewess."

"What has that to do with anything? Trotsky's a Jew, and Sverdlov, Litvinov, Chicherin, Radek, Zinoviev, Kamenev, Krestinsky—"

"When I was alive I was a Social Revolutionary, but now that I'm dead I've become quite the little Jewess. When they arrested me they continually spoke of my Jewish features—"

"That's all cant," Krupskaya insisted. "You know that national origins mean nothing. Don't tell me you committed that crime because you're a Jew."

She'd found herself saying "that crime" because she did not want to utter her husband's name in front of this wretch. To call him "Lenin" would be to deny her relationship to him, which felt almost like a betrayal; whereas "Volodya" would be too intimate—she certainly desired no intimacy with F. D. Kaplan. In public she frequently used the familiar yet still somewhat official "Ilyich," which might be thinkable here, but somehow she preferred that the victim's presence loom unnameably between them, like the blade of a giant guillotine.

"But why not just call what I did a religious act?" the woman asked, with a nervously goading smile. "Why not call it a mystery?"

Krupskaya, her lips pressed together, her chin thrust ever so slightly forward, said, "So you acted out of some fanatical superstition, I take it."

"I shot Lenin because I believe him to be a traitor."

"Then you do deserve death. At a time like this, when Russia is—"

"Of course I'm a fanatic. The fewer possibilities I have, the more urgently I must imagine."

"I cannot understand you."

"Nadezhda Konstantinovna, you know very well what we demand: universal suffrage, freedom of the press, peasant power, a representative people's government—"

"But those pseudo-democratic phrases of yours are printed in the constitutions of capitalist republics all over the world! Don't you see that they mean nothing? How can you support universal suffrage when the richest people control the vote? A people's government—of which people? You've let yourself become a pawn of the White Guard clique—"

"Even a pawn sometimes controls destiny," the woman replied, with a beautiful smile.

KRUPSKAYA'S wifely solicitude had sometimes interposed itself between Lenin and Stalin, which to Stalin was unforgivable. And, in the present case, he thought, her compulsive attachment to a traitor she'd never met constituted no less than an assault upon the Party. She had embarrassed Lenin. Here was a chance to do Lenin a favor, but also to put that fat old hag in her place. Moreover, he now had the perfect means to blackmail Lenin should he ever need to.

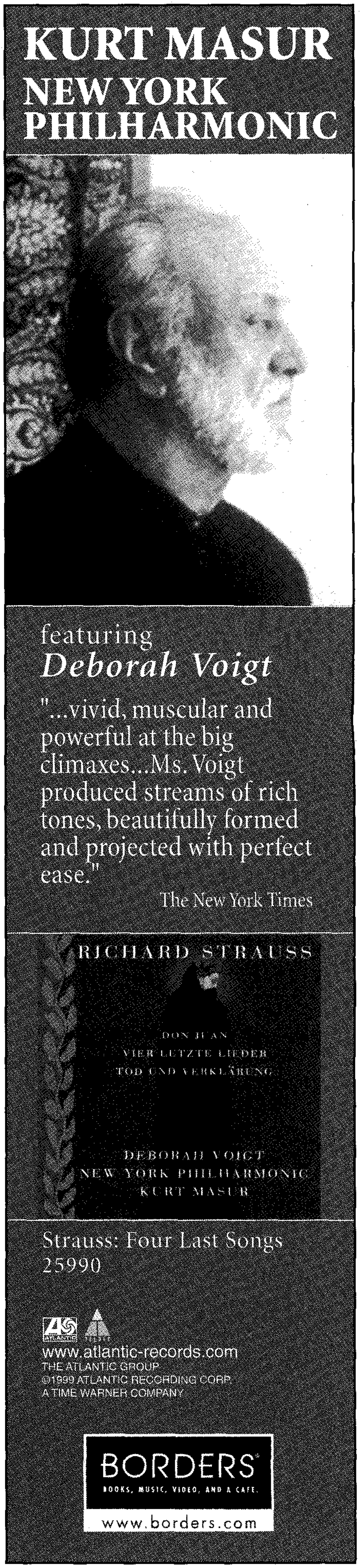
And so, when the actress had been brought to his office and stood before him straight as the letter *vau*, which resembles a nail, Stalin had lit his pipe, looked her over, then said, "Well, Comrade, do you understand that you've been given a gigantic moral responsibility?"

"Yes, Comrade Stalin, I do."

"I have my doubts that you do. Listen, you. We don't want the old cunt to put us to this trouble again. Just because she shares a bathroom with Lenin is no reason I have to respect her. Make her hate you, and don't let her pin you down on anything. Mystification is in order, get it? *Nu*, you're a Yid, so act like a Yid."

Stalin's will, if the black-clad woman had deciphered it correctly, was that she punish and terrify Krupskaya. Each syllable she uttered must become a ravening animal poised for attack.

Unlike most inmates of that epoch, the actress could see her future as brightly as if it were a six-pointed star of violet fire. Until she ceased to exist, Lenin and Stalin would worry that their trick might be exposed. No matter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what she said or did, she was doomed.

So she felt herself even more tightly pinned to silence—like Fanya Kaplan herself, who'd done nothing, it was said, but stare out the window of her cell, waiting for the bullet in her back.

MOST critics agree that fiction is more than mere falsehood. Well-crafted protagonists come to life, pornography causes orgasms, and the pretense that life is what we want it to be may conceivably work its effect on reality. Hence religious parables, socialist realism, Communist propaganda. And if this story likewise crawls with reactionary supernaturalism, that may be because its author longs to see letters scuttling across ceilings, cautiously beginning to reify themselves into angels. For if they could do that, then why not us?

A kindred longing for autonomy doubtless animated the prisoner when in her low and leaden voice she whispered, "Have you ever read the Kabbalah?"

"I haven't time for that trash," Krupskaya answered.

"It's written that man is the moving hand and God is the shadow. Only man can save God. And now you and Lenin are the two gods of Russia. Don't deny it, Nadezhda Konstantinovna! You yourself are God. And only I can save you. Only I can repair your glory."

Krupskaya half rose, staring at her in astonishment. "So that's the kind you are," she said. "You're not even intelligent."

"Not at all. But at least *I am real.* I tried to kill Lenin because he wanted to be God, but now that he's achieved his aim he's become my shadow, so I must worship him. And you, too, with your tremors, your isolation, and your silliness, you're my shadow, too! If it weren't for me, you wouldn't be here. . . ."

"You should be in an asylum. I'm leaving."

"I don't ask for justifications, Nadezhda Konstantinovna. Only for your pity."

"I beg your pardon! Why should I answer to you, a murderess?" Krupskaya's heart was pounding. Rubbing her forehead, rapidly gasping, she wondered when a stroke would do her in.

"Look at me. Look at where I am. Will you pity me?" the woman insisted.

Krupskaya wanted to weep, but dared not. Clearing her throat, she haltingly said, "I remember when I was in prison and I felt so passionately that armed struggle was necessary. And I—I think that you, too, must feel passionately."

The woman's face swelled then with a dull ecstasy, and she knelt before Krupskaya on the flagstones of the cell, flinging back her head, offering her throat, so that in her shape she resembled the letter *beth,* which means both wisdom and madness.

Then Krupskaya began to tremble, and she said, "You're not Fanya Kaplan, are you?"

"If I'm not who I say I am, draw your own conclusions."

"Is she dead?"

Rising, the woman said, "In other words, you wish to know whether I am the assassin herself, or the manifestation of an assassin."

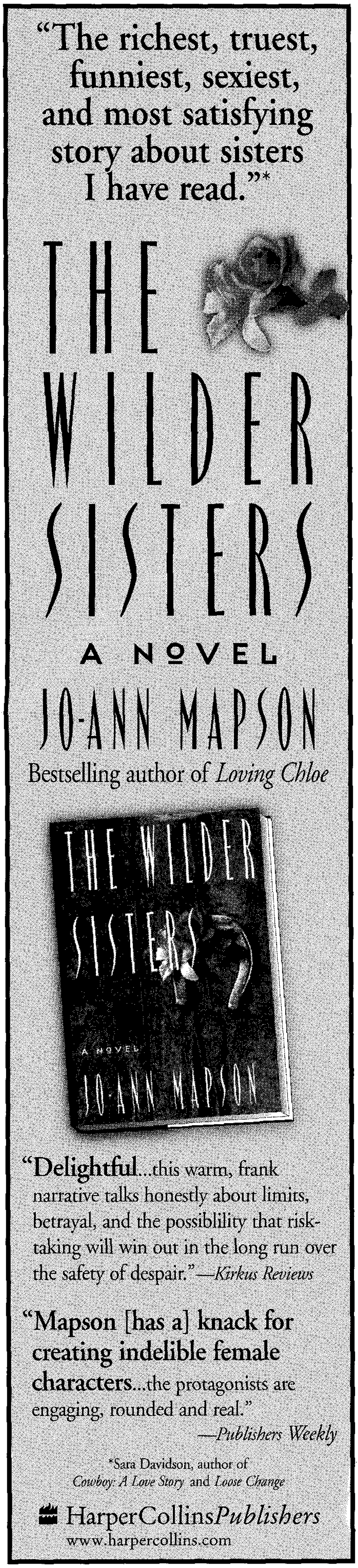
"Who are you?"

"I am your revelation."

Then the woman (who, unlike both Krupskaya and Fanya Kaplan, wished to delay her own doom) knelt down once more and began to murmur.

Krupskaya sat paralyzed. Afterward she could scarcely remember her sensations. It was as if she hadn't been there at all, or had been there only in some insubstantial sense, like a wisp of smoke. . . . The woman trembled and fell upon the floor foaming at the mouth, and at that moment the writhing Hebrew letters upon the wall became as red as fire and took wing, gathering into a circular swarm about the woman's face, so that her features were obscured, just as Fanya Kaplan's execution had been veiled in the mysterious roaring of an automobile engine. (Malkov had been afraid that otherwise bystanders might hear her scream.) Then the letters disappeared into the woman's mouth. Krupskaya was speechless.

In a voice as soft as the lace in Russian shopwindows before the Revolution, the woman said, "I have beheld you, I have prayed to you, and I have repaired



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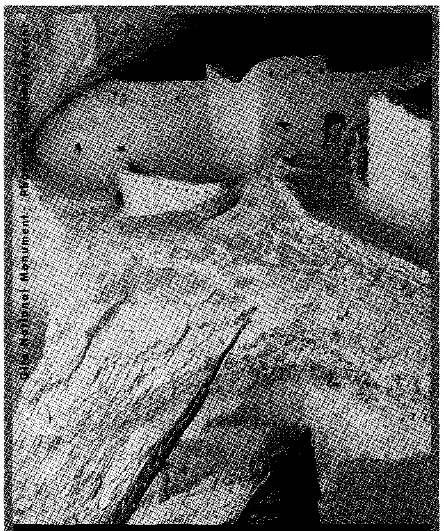

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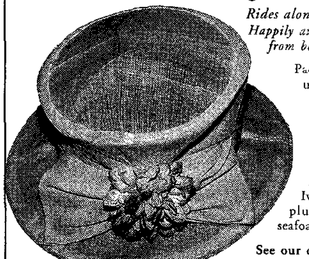

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your glory with the power of righteousness. You stand guiltless. But, as for me, now I shall surely die."

"Who are you?" said Krupskaya, squeezing the woman's hand.

"I am you. I have become you. I have given myself utterly to you. And now what will you do? You are innocent and perfect, so you can do anything."

"Who are you?"

"I am unknowable," the woman whispered. "I am nothing."

BRUSHING past the fixed bayonets of ironically polite Chekists outside the Kremlin wall, Krupskaya ascended the three long, steep flights of stairs, clenching her trembling hands.

Not long afterward, Comrade Angelica Balabanoff came to visit Krupskaya. When she raised the subject of Fanya Kaplan's execution, Krupskaya, it is said, wept many tears.

Here, perhaps, the parable should end, because in her last years Krupskaya shared scant sisterhood with either of the two Fanya Kaplans. She preached, lectured, travelled, and set up schools, ever remaining enchanted, though she could not admit it, by the old Narodnik slogan "Go to the people." In her writings recurred this phrase: "The task before us . . ." Kabbalistically she now possessed affinity for the letter *yod*, which resembles a deformed bullet dug out of a corpse and which means, above all, praxis. The rapture was gone. She no longer hoped to write in the Book of Life, or even to be Lenin's copy editor. In 1936, we find her writing in support of Stalin's show trials that many of her own former comrades in arms deserved to be shot like mad dogs (a stilted commonplace of the time). By then she'd become a sad, round-faced babushka, a good *kommunistka* who stared slowly at the world. Sometimes she heard whispers that Fanya Kaplan was still alive. She credulously accepted such rumors, which were presented to her like offerings.

Superior in her destiny to the murdered murderess, she escaped even the show trials. She died of arterial sclerosis in 1939. It seems a strangely appropriate disease for one whose vitality and spontaneity had been gradually blocked. Stalin was among those who carried her funeral urn to its waiting niche in the Kremlin wall. ♦

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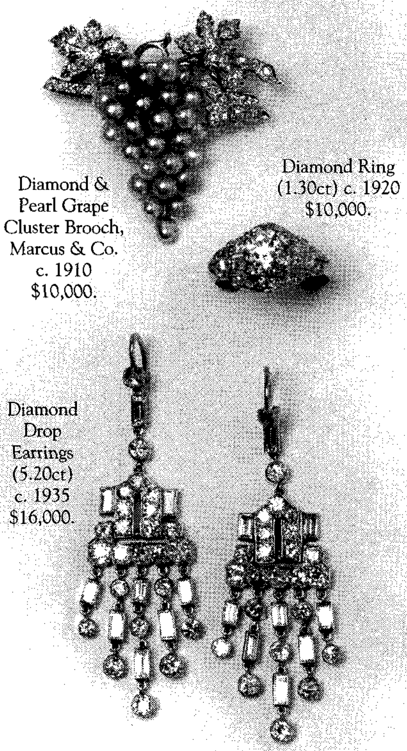

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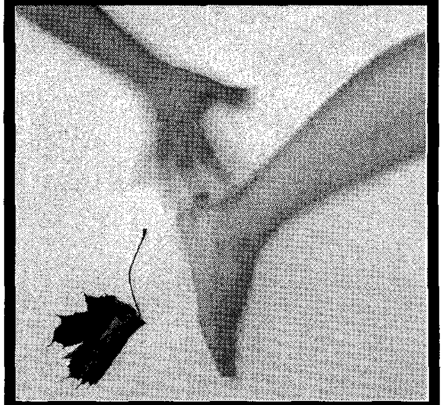

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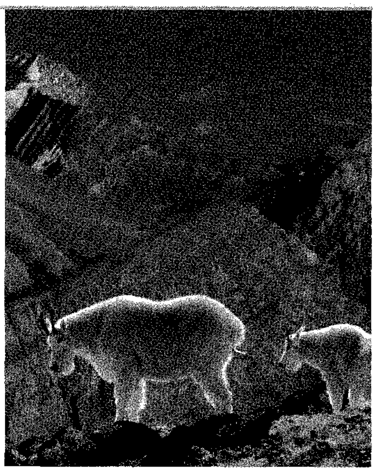

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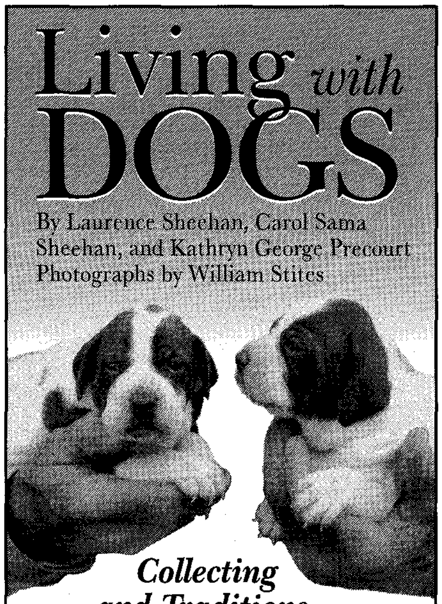

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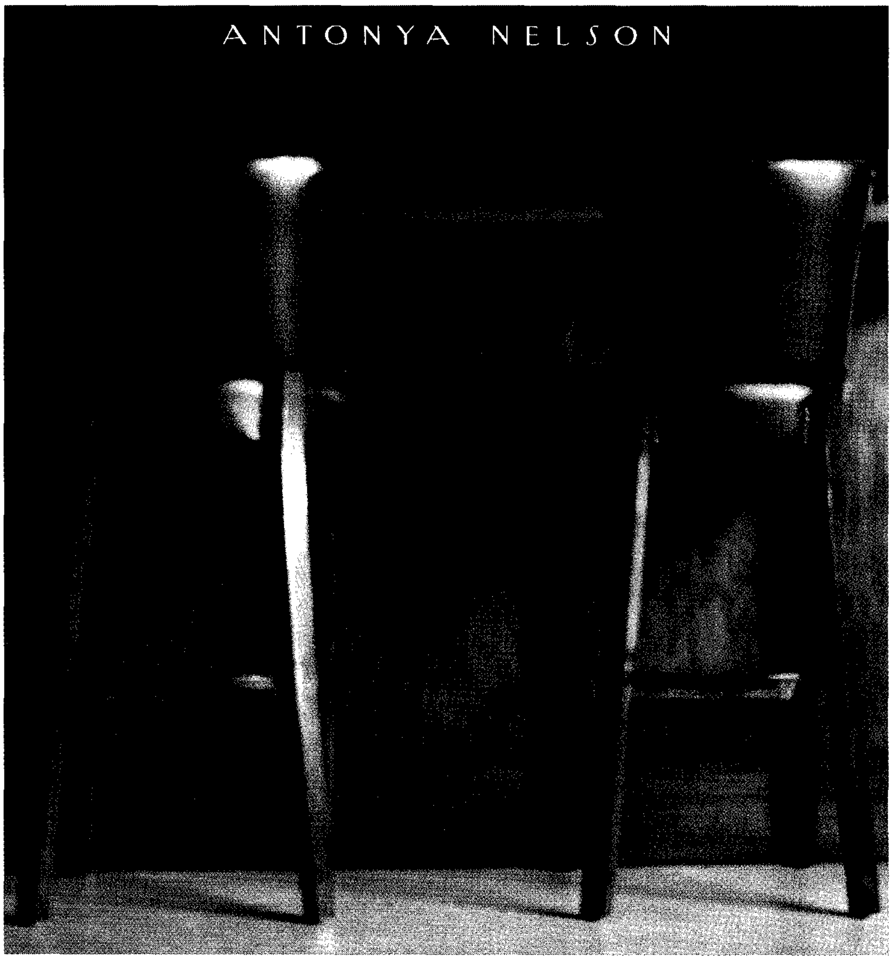

ANTONYA NELSON

“Party of one?” the hostess greeted Emily. She caught her breath. Everything was striking her in the solar plexus these days. “Party of one” seemed the saddest phrase she could imagine, so oxymoronic. Or like a code name for masturbation. Or for death.

“No,” she was glad to be able to say, “I’m meeting somebody.”

The hostess might have been amused by the circumstances, had she known them, or, just as easily, unimpressed. Emily had come to meet her sister Mona’s lover, who was breaking Mona’s heart. Who had no idea how big a break it was.

The Grapevine had gone trendy since high school, when Emily and her friends used to come to the bar for lunch. There hadn’t been a hostess back then, dressed in black, with spike heels, and there hadn’t been linen tablecloths. Back then, there’d been a useful absence of bright lights and stringent requirements about valid I.D. You came to the Grapevine because anything went.

Tonight, she was here to meet Nicholas Dempsey. She identified him easily: he was the most antsy man at the bar.

“You look like Mona,” he said, standing up awkwardly around his barstool, which rocked on its four legs. In a suit, he looked disguised, a youngster trying to sucker someone into believing him grown up, although his hair was the dirty tousled blond of the bad seed, and his feet were alluringly big. He wore a wedding ring, gleaming and unscarred, a ring that had not yet fallen into the garbage disposal or got lost for days at a time in the back yard.

He extended the hand without a wedding ring for Emily to shake. And she thought what she always thought when she shook a man’s hand: the last thing that hand had gripped, and in just this way, was his own dick at a urinal.

“You could be her twin,” he said in disbelief. He was drinking a black-and-tan, which looked as rich as chocolate, molasses floating a layer of cream. He

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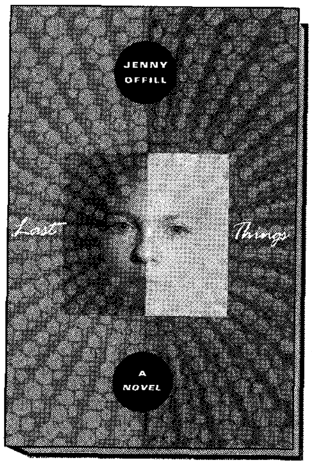
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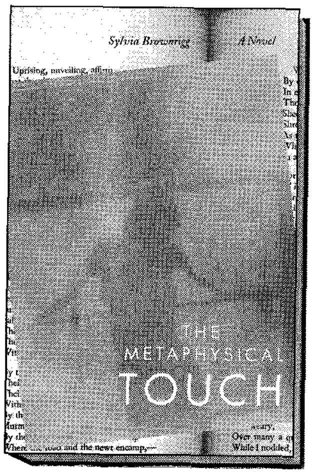
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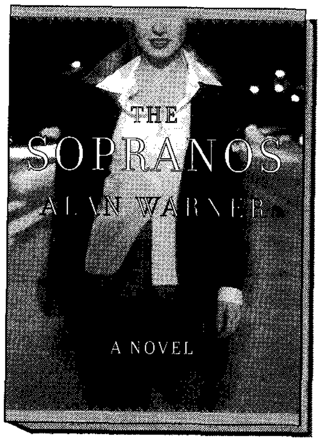
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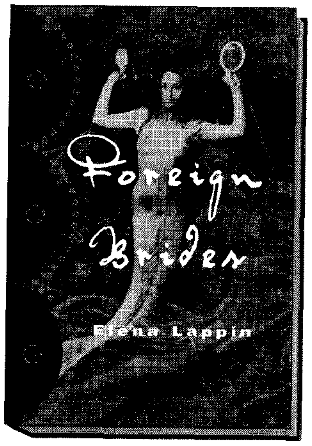
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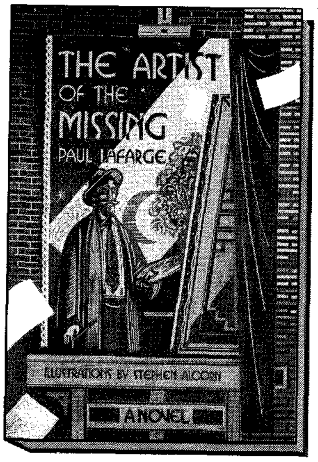
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had a faint rim of foam on his thin upper lip.

Emily lifted her hip onto the barstool beside him, wiping her palm on a cocktail napkin. "Merlot," she told the bartender.

"Your sister always orders whatever I order," Nicholas Dempsey said.

"She's easy."

He shook his head, lips thoughtfully pinched as if to whistle. "She's not easy. That's just the problem."

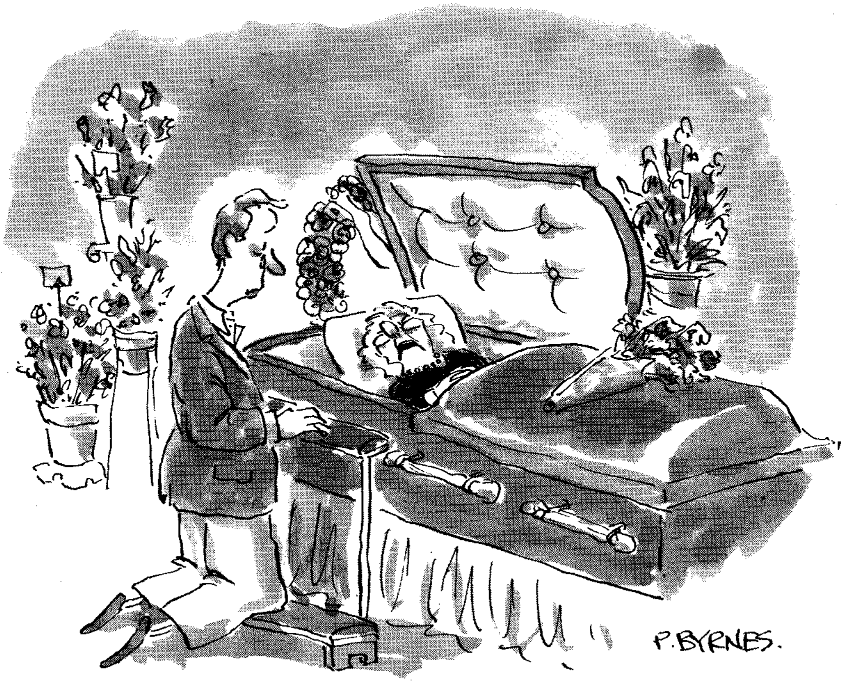
Emily had to agree; it was why she had come.

The signature trellises still lined the bar's walls, plastic grapes hung from dusty synthetic leaves. Once, she and her friends had celebrated a birthday here—whose?—an extended lunch, pitchers of golden beer in the afternoon sunlight, a blood-colored chocolate cake called Red Velvet. Their hands and lips were brilliant with crimson dye when they returned—as if from a crime scene—stoned and sated, ribs sore from laughter, to honors fifth hour. Emily missed her youth with a sharp pang, as if it were a beautiful dream on the verge of dissolving: Come back!

Nicholas Dempsey's loose-hinged knee knocked suddenly into hers, forcing their eyes to meet, the present to descend. Like his wedding ring, he was unmarked by experience, party-boy pretty, someone who in later years would trade his smug slimness for a paunch, his rosy glowing cheeks for gin blossoms. Emily sighed. She had intimated blackmail to get him here. But all she really wanted to do was to instruct him on how to break up with Mona well, so that she wouldn't try to kill herself again, the way she had on her last breakup from a married man with children.

Emily had watched that chain of events with a kind of horror, and most horrifying of all had been her part in setting it off. The man had been her husband, and she'd discovered his affair with Mona in the tiniest of mistakes. In the large areas—rendezvous, phone calls, love notes—they'd been scrupulously discreet, but at the micro level they'd failed. One evening, Emily had watched Mona simply lift Barry's cup and sip his coffee. Just that small moment, that piece of thoughtless intimacy, and Emily knew that they were sleeping together. She gave Barry a blow job that night and told him that he had to end his affair, pronto, naming no names, citing no evidence. He was in the habit of being wowed by her; and he complied with her wish immediately, as if afraid of her abilities, as if he might otherwise be transformed into a toad.

That same night, Mona had ingested as many pharmaceuticals as she could lay her hands on, and not two weeks later Emily found herself shrieking at her sister to take her antidepressants, pulling her into and out of the back seat of a car for her therapy sessions. Somehow Emily's own right as an injured party had been pushed aside for the larger issue of



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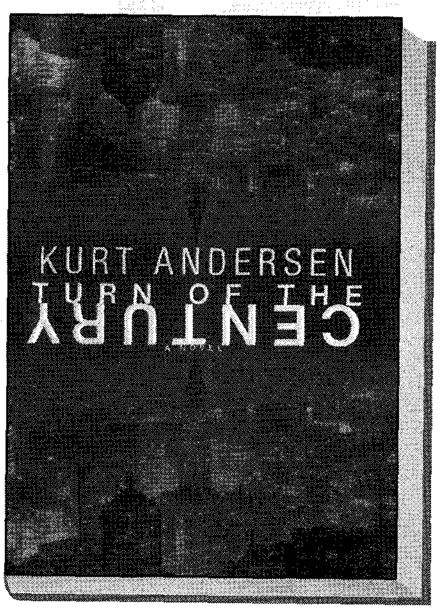

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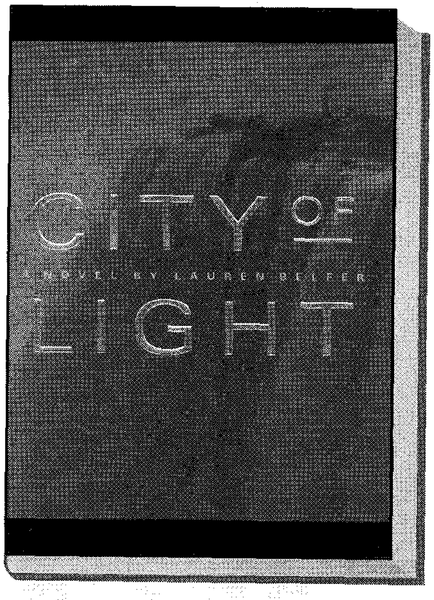

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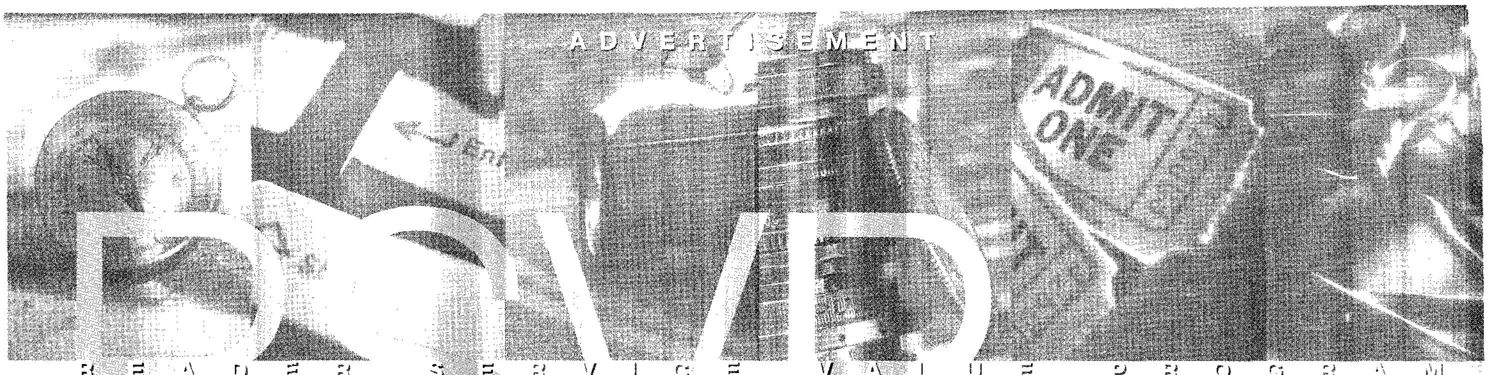

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her sister’s life. You could get nowhere trying to assign blame in such a circumstance—everyone seemed both victim and perpetrator. But Mona, it could not be disputed, had been the loser. Barry had won, taken so much from her that she was left empty. Now Barry was Emily’s ex, and Mona still believed that the affair had been secret.

Emily thought of herself as an amazing repository, a holder of secrets, and she was now harboring a new one of her own: a cancer that smoldered deep inside her, ready to ignite her from the inside out. Neither Mona nor Barry knew about that, either.

Emily had heard that Nicholas Dempsey had two children, the ages, more or less, of her own children. He did not seem qualified to be a parent, but who was she to judge, given her own inadequate ex-husband?

“How’s Mona?” he said finally, his tone weary.

Emily pictured her sister on the bathroom floor just the evening before. She’d opened the door after knocking and not getting an answer, pushing into the room while unzipping her jeans, and the door caught on what turned out to be Mona’s feet. Mona lay on the bath mat, half dressed, fists at her eyes, sobbing silently, in a tableau that bore the appearance of insanity: tub full of water, its still surface broken every few seconds by a slow drip, lights off, razor nicks on Mona’s calves and knees, as if she’d been attacked by a rosebush.

“Mona!” Emily had cried. “What’s wrong?”

“Bluh,” her sister said.

“Bluh?”

“How come everybody knows how to act, anyway?” Mona asked. “How’d you get so confident?”

Emily stepped around Mona to sit on the toilet. “Do you mind? I have to pee.” Her need to urinate was twice as frequent now. Often when she laughed she leaked, like an old person, the way she had during pregnancy. Her female parts were betraying her, sending her to a new specialist, the one called a “gyno onco.”

“Pee freely,” Mona said dispassionately.

Emily flushed, then spread a bath towel over her sister and knelt down by her head. Emily’s job, always, was to ferry her sister from despairing, drifting sea to solid land. But what had put Mona at sea this time?

“What happened?” Emily asked.

And so the story of Nicholas Dempsey had come out. Emily listened, unsurprised. Was there any lesson more often reiterated than that history repeats itself? That people have a will to live and not learn? Her married boyfriend had stopped calling her. Mona expected the worst. She pleaded with her sister for an explanation. “I don’t get it. I can’t get it. He just stopped caring. Where was I when they were handing out that particular gift?”

That this man beside Emily at the bar, this random breathing organism named Nicholas Dempsey, could be responsible for such devastation seemed like a cruel hoax. He’d asked about her sister, and Emily did not know how honest to be.

“Mona is confused,” she said, which seemed safe, something you could say of anyone worth her salt.

“So am I,” he said quickly.

“I bet Mona is more confused.”

“Well, I don’t want to get into one-upping misery.”

Emily appraised him, recalling her sister’s misery, which hung on her like a lead apron. On the bathroom floor, Mona had accepted toilet paper to blow her nose. “How could he just stop?” she asked again.

“It’s self-protective,” Emily guessed. Didn’t men do that, the preëmptive strike?

“Would *you* be able to just stop? Let’s say you’d been having a raging, obsessive romance for about six months, every waking minute spent thinking about each other, calling each other, leaving messages, meeting in parking lots and weird motels out in Augusta and Kingman. I mean, I *know* it was reciprocal. I don’t have any doubt about it. So how does he just pull the plug on that? Could you?” Her open, wounded face made her look like she was a four-year-old again, appealing to Emily for an explanation of the cruel world, the boy who’d sucker-punched her and stolen her candy. Innocence like that was stunningly dangerous.

“I could,” she confessed. She had. “Although I sort of wish that I couldn’t, if you want to know the truth.”

“Why?” Mona cried. “Why would you want to suffer like this?”

Because it was pure, and because it meant that its inspiration had been just as powerful. This kind of distilled pain could only have come from sublime pleasure; Emily pictured a huge shade tree, under which grew a root system as knotty and veiny and vast as the tree above, mirrored there in the subterranean

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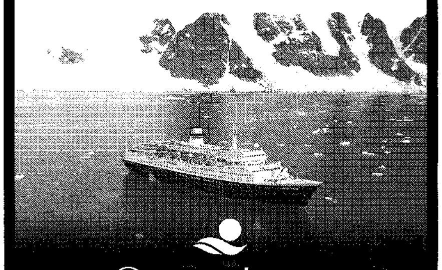

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dark, inhabited by slick eyeless centipedes instead of songbirds. Was that not some definition of perversion?

What was difficult was reconciling Mona's response with the figure beside her at the Grapevine. Nicholas Dempsey sipped his creamy drink. Emily wanted to push him off his stool and kick him, repeatedly, in the groin, where his reckless penis hid, and in the ribs that housed his tiny, tiny heart. Instead, she said, "You kind of have the upper hand right now."

He sighed mightily. He seemed to enjoy the adult quality of the situation, the disposal of his first mistress. There would be others, it was clear. "My favorite thing about Mona is how, when she wakes up, she stretches," Nicholas Dempsey said, trying a new tack. "I love how she makes her hands into fists, and there's her belly button, and her face is a little hedge apple, all squeezed up. You know?" He stared into Emily's impassive eyes. So what if he could speak metaphorically? She was trying to figure out if he was a sweet person or not. These days, she had more skepticism than usual concerning sweetness. She couldn't afford to be fooled. She had no time for games, however intricately fashioned they revealed their player to be. Talking about her sister in bed seemed unappealingly intimate, like some strange come-on line. Or perhaps he was merely naïve. Was he flirting? Or simply eager to talk about his secret life? Besides, the last time Emily had seen Mona's fists, they'd been grinding into her weeping eye sockets.

"I just can't manage having an affair anymore," he said abruptly. Emily felt some shift in him, some veil of coolness slip off.

"Because?"

"She's too intense. She was messing with my home life." He licked his lips. *Too intense:* Here they went again. Barry couldn't handle her intensity, either. Intensity frightened cowards like Emily's ex-husband and this jerk. Moreover, how had Mona manufactured intensity for Nicholas Dempsey? Like Barry, there seemed to be little to attach to in Nicholas Dempsey; his charm was utterly elusive, or had yet to develop. But of course that was beside the point. Love was all about creating the beloved, concocting from whole cloth the object of one's affection. Mona's version of Nicholas Dempsey resided in her mind and body and heart, and it was a character Emily couldn't begin to understand

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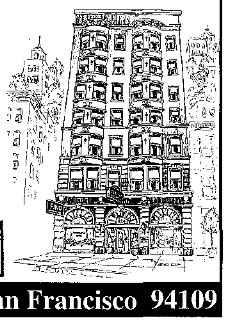

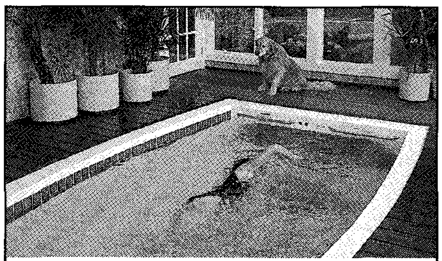

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or know. She'd heard all about their long conversations, their secret assignations, heard in Mona's voice the man she had made up—who bore little resemblance to the man before Emily now.

"I mean, it seems like she changed the rules," the real Nicholas Dempsey said.

"Her feelings changed," Emily said. "She likes you more than she thought."

"But the deal is I told her right up front that I was married, and I wasn't going to get unmarried. I have been in no way leading her on."

He was a letter-of-the-law sort, she thought. "Sometimes people fall in love," she told him. Emily knew Mona fell. Fell hard, and hurt herself, and then felt in every important way that the rejection was justified. Sure enough: she was unworthy. Every one of Mona's relationships ended without her permission. That she would let herself fall in love over and over—open herself like a flayed animal—seemed to Emily both beautiful and insane.

The way Nicholas Dempsey stared into Emily's face told her that this wasn't his first drink, that he'd been here for a while, fortifying himself. She had the sudden wild impression that, if she wanted to, she could go with him to wherever it was he went for these sorts of things and make love.

"You look so much like Mona it's scary," he said, blinking deliberately.

"I'm five years older and an inch taller, and my head is smaller. She's got this great heart-shaped face." Emily prattled on some more about the differences between her and her sister, but Nicholas Dempsey was peering into her in a familiar and unsettling manner. If she resembled her sister, and if he had undressed her sister, then he was capable of seeing inside her clothing. Nothing she'd heard in high-school forensics applied; her audience had a complete understanding of not only her underwear but what it covered. Nicholas Dempsey's frank expression of longing was flattering, there was no denying it. A body wanted to be loved, wanted to respond to desire. She sighed, feeling she was getting far ahead of herself. Sleeping with her sister's lover would make her and Mona even in some way, yet Emily didn't sense that revenge was necessary. Barry and Mona had both seemed to need to punish her for her sheer competence in being an adult, and it was oddly elegant—economical—that they'd done so together. Emily had forgiven them long ago, she realized, so sleeping with Nicholas Dempsey would not be revenge but something else, a fresh joust, a new wounding of her sister. She could afford it because a cancer was growing inside her. Once Mona knew about it, she would have to forgive almost anything.

Nicholas Dempsey had ordered another black-and-tan before he'd finished the one on the bar. He was the kind of drinker who doesn't like to be left empty-handed. This made him more interesting to Emily, put a dent in his generic demeanor. He was becoming distinct to her now, someone with personality, and though it was a personality she disliked, at least it had edges and angles.

"Wine?" he asked, raising his eyebrows at her half-full glass.

"Sure."

"Here's the thing that clinched it," he said. "My daughter—she's eleven months old—she crawled over to me a few weeks ago, after I got home, the last time I was out with Mona, 'working late.'" He used both hands to make bunny ears around his euphemism. "Anyhow, so I get home, all glowing and smug, and there's little Ella, doing her thing with the furniture. She can't walk yet, just goes around from one piece of furniture to another, like a drunk. Way cute. So she crawls into my lap and starts patting my face, like she forgot what I looked like, I'd been gone so long. I can't tell you how"—he searched for the word, the future crow's-feet at his eyes appearing briefly—"*despicable* I felt. How low and repulsive, how I'd been looking into Mona's face when I should have been at home with my daughter."

"Uh-huh," Emily said blandly. He'd patted his own face when he imitated his daughter, and she couldn't help thinking about Petra, *her* toddler, who might have to get along without her mother. This made Nicholas Dempsey's problem seem so mild to Emily, so self-indulgent and ridiculous, that she wanted to punch him. Fuck you, you little punk, getting all angsted out by a love affair.

Emily drained her first glass, setting it down so sharply that the stem snapped. Nicholas Dempsey looked alarmed. "What's the matter?"

"Oh, nothing."

The bartender swept away the two

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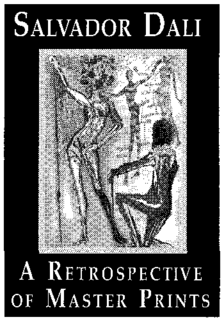

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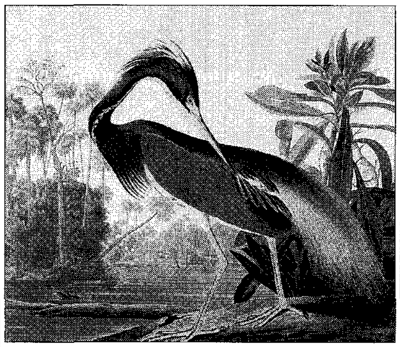

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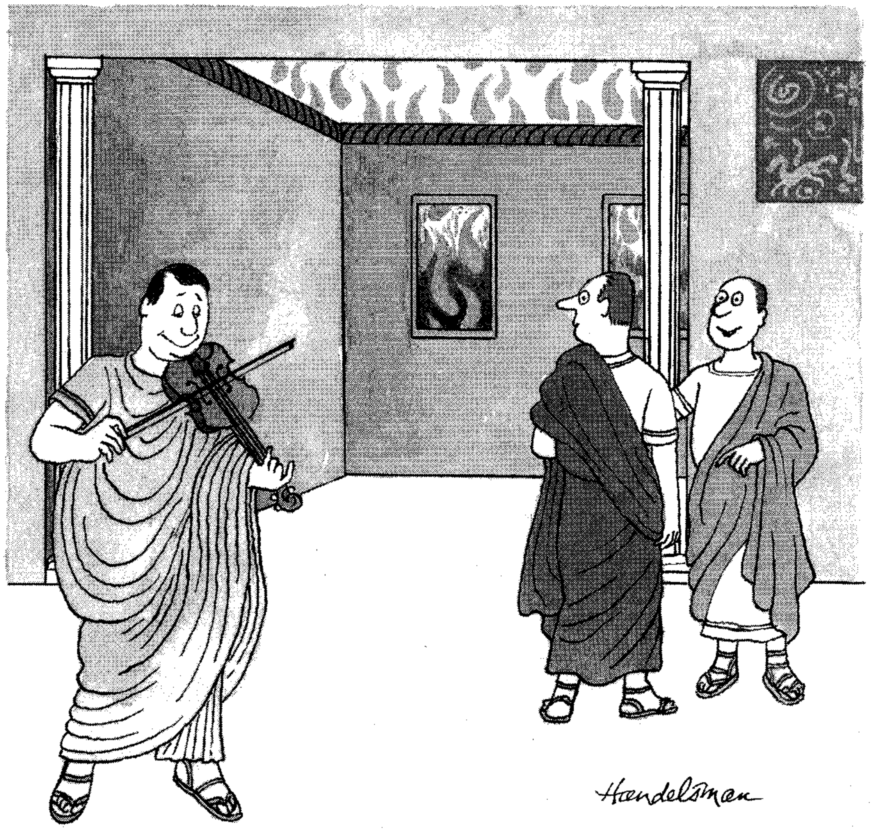

"Truly a magnificent emperor! While Rome burns, Nero plays an instrument that hasn't been invented yet."

pieces of the glass without expression. All in a day's work. "I don't know why wineglasses have to be so delicate, do you?" A worthier man would have known to comfort her then, but Nicholas Dempsey, hopelessly young and self-absorbed, grew afraid, and addressed the issue of stemware instead of the forceful hand that had brought it down.

"Hush," Emily said to him finally. He bristled, but he closed his mouth. "My sister is fragile, even though you think she's tough." Emily did not want to disclose Mona's suicide attempt; if Mona hadn't told him, then he oughtn't to know. "Do you think you could possibly work this out so that she thinks she broke up with you?" She had to restrain herself from going into a rant about his ability to pull off such a trick, because she knew that he wasn't likely to be good at this kind of orchestration. He did not want to be the one who got dumped. He was not someone who got his heart broken. And it was Emily's job to persuade him how truly manly it was to commit such a thing, to fabricate a broken heart. It was true that he had the most to lose—his wife, his children—but Mona had no one to cushion her fall, no one. Parents and siblings and even a cute niece and nephew were not the same, not nearly. And, so far, Petra wasn't really that cute.

Emily drank her second glass of wine quickly, felt it take up glowing residence. "O.K.," she said. "The deal is you can do this really easily. Just go make yourself miserable in front of Mona, suffer some guilt, tell her the story about the baby patting your face. That's a really good story. And you have a son, right? He probably talks and could say some things about missing you? Maybe your wife could get sick?"

Nicholas Dempsey stared at her, no doubt thinking, This woman looks a lot like Mona but she is totally not Mona. Emily waited.

"What kind of sick?" he asked.

"I don't know. Uterine cancer?"

He made a face. Emily swallowed something bitter, trying not to squint unkindly at his youth, at the arrogance that had revealed itself. *His* wife would never have uterine cancer.

"Mono? Anemia? Give one of the kids strep—that'll keep you home for a few days, then you can get it yourself. Let

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your immune system run down, get some bags under your eyes." He would be vastly improved with bags under his eyes, Emily realized. With bags, he might turn into something. "Start looking bedraggled and hopeless, and let Mona take the initiative. Let Mona rescue you by ending the deception." When he didn't respond, Emily said, "The deception that is eating away at you."

"Right."

"Are you patronizing me?"

"No," he said, throwing his head back, swallowing the last of his black-and-tan, his Adam's apple working in an ugly fashion. "No, you're patronizing *me* is what's going on here."

"Another?" the bartender said, unhurried, familiar with scenes. Would it be interesting to tend bar? Would it make you wise? Or just jaded? Were the two the same?

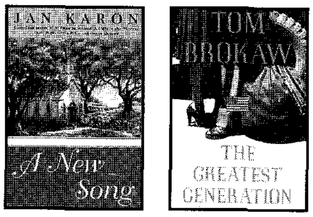
"Mona's sister," she'd told his snotty secretary that morning, when a name had been demanded. He came instantly to the phone then, agreed readily to their meeting. Now Emily levelled the same threat. "If you don't at least try to do what I've suggested, I'm going to call your wife and tell her all about Mona. And I might give you a few other girlfriends." She stood up and nearly fainted, so quickly did the blood leave her head. She bent over, took a deep breath. "You seem like someone who needs to have a whole stable of girlfriends."

"Fuck you."

For some reason, this made Emily laugh. The last person to say "Fuck you" to her had been Barry. It was his favorite phrase; he said it all day long, could inflect it in a hundred different ways, give it a whole continuum of shadings. He could say it like Nicholas Dempsey, in anger, and wholly unlike him, as in the middle of sex: "*Fuck . . . you,*" with longing and release and pure animal pleasure. Emily missed Barry just now—young and useless as he was, he was still preferable to Nicholas Dempsey. How had she ended up having Nicholas Dempsey say "Fuck you" to her in this cold, mean manner?

"She's way too good for you," Emily couldn't help telling him, and feeling the truth of what she'd said swell in her made her want to slap him. Her love for Mona was bigger than him, better than him, and it couldn't help matters in the least—a fat impotent fact, a gun loaded with blanks.

"Yeah?" he said, like a bully. "Well, you're nothing like her, not one thing." ♦



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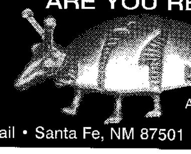

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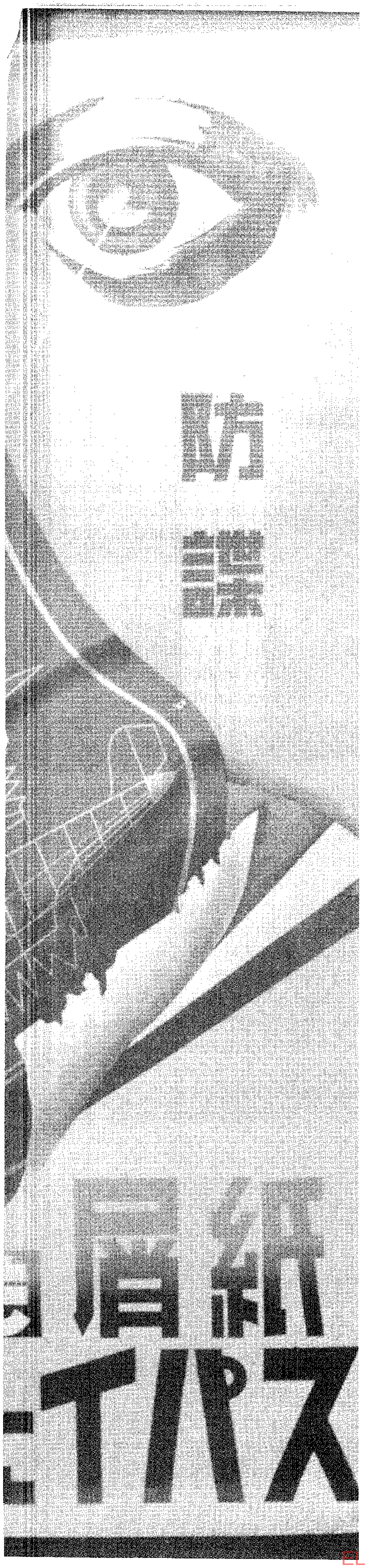


When I was a young man, I didn't seek out the pleasure of women. At least not like my comrades in arms, who in their every spare moment seemed ravenous for any part of a woman, in any form, whether in photographs or songs or recounted stories, and, of course, whenever possible, in the flesh. Pictures were most favored, being easy. I remember a corporal who kept illicit photographs of disrobed maidens in his radio codebook, a sheaf of images he had salvaged from a bombed-out colonial mansion in Indonesia. Whenever I walked by the communications tent, he would call out in a most proper voice, "Lieutenant Kurohata, sir, may I receive an opinion from you, please?"

The women in his pictures were Western, I think French or Dutch, and had been caught by the camera in compromising positions—bending over to pick up a dropped book, for example, or being attended in the bath by another nude woman. Corporal Endo had perhaps a score of these, each featuring a different scene, and he shuffled through them with an unswerving awe and reverence that made me think he might be a Christian. Of course, I shouldn't have allowed him to address me so familiarly, as I was superior to him in rank, but we were from the same province and home town, and he was exuberantly innocent and youthful and he never called to me if others were within earshot. I knew that he had never been with a woman, but in going through his photos he seemed to have become privy to the secrets of lovemaking.

I myself, at that time, had been initiated only once, but, unlike the Corporal, I found little of interest in the hand-size tableaux. They held for me none of the drama that he clearly savored in them. Instead, they smacked of the excess and privilege of a sclerotic, purulent culture—the very forces that our nation's people were struggling against, from Papua New Guinea and Indonesia to the densely forested foothills of old Burma, where we were posted, approximately a hundred and twenty-five kilometres from the outskirts of Rangoon. The women in the photo cards were full figured, and no longer really young, though several of them were attractive in an exotic manner.

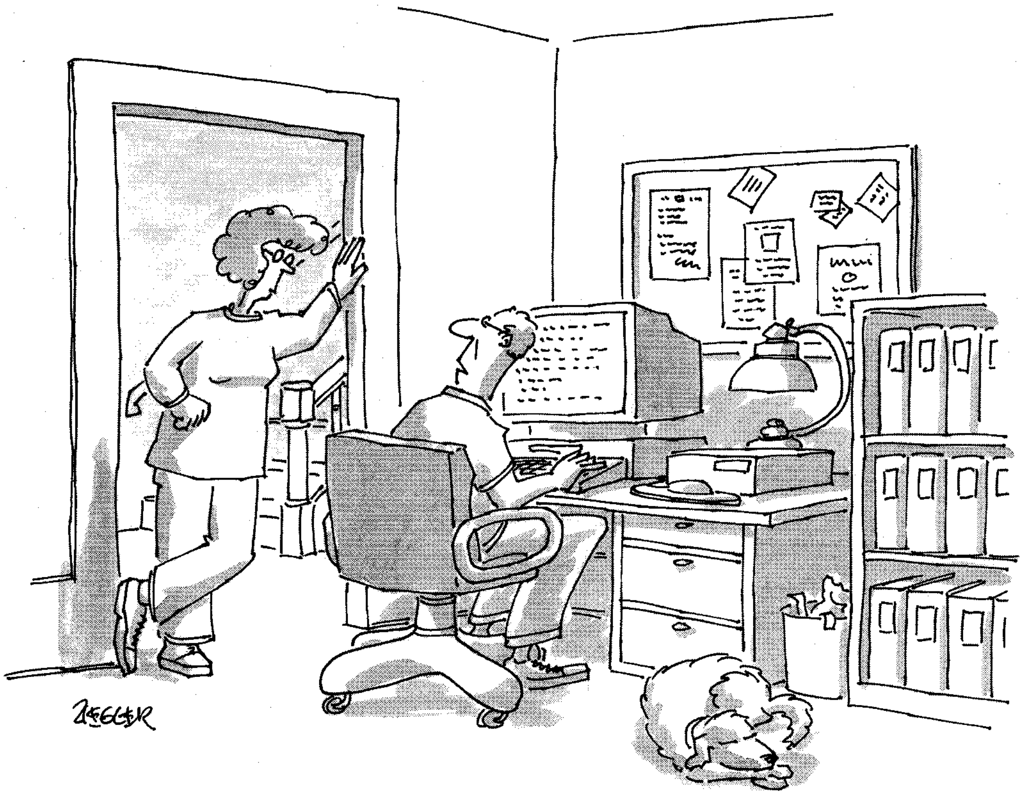
The image I preferred was the one of the bath, and although Corporal Endo offered several times to give me that particular card, I didn't want the worry of keeping it among my few personal things. Should I be killed, those items, along with my ashen remains, would be tendered to my family in Japan, as was customary. In most cases, the officer in charge of such transferrals checked the package to make sure that it contained only the most necessary (and honorable) effects, but one heard of embarrassing instances when grieving elders were forced to confront awkward last notions of their dead. I feared it would be especially shaming in my circumstance. When I was a young boy, I had left the narrow existence of my birth family and our ghetto of hide tanners and renderers—most of us were ethnic Koreans, though we spoke and lived as Japanese, if ones in twilight—to live with a Japanese couple, well-to-do and childless, who treated me as if I were their son. I believed that as adoptive parents they might shoulder the burden of my vices even more heavily than if I had been born to them, blood of their blood, as there would be no excuse but their raising of me. Indeed, I wanted to prove myself in the crucible of the battlefield, and to prove to anyone who might suspect otherwise the worthiness of raising me away from the lowly quarters of my kin. Still, being twenty-three years old and having been with only one woman, a prostitute, during my first posting, in Singapore, I was periodically given to the enticements of such base things, and unable to stop myself from stepping into the radio tent whenever the Corporal addressed me.

"Have I shown you this new series, sir?" he said one sweltering afternoon, reaching into the back flap of his codebook. His eyes seemed bright, almost feral. "I traded some of mine to a fellow in munitions. He had these. He said he was tired of them, sir."

There were several photographs pasted into a small journal which depicted women and men together, patently engaging in sexual intercourse. I had never seen such pictures before. The style of the photography was documentary, almost clinical, as though the overexposed frames were meant for a textbook on human coitus. To my mind, there was nothing remotely titillating in them, save perhaps the shocking idea that people had willingly performed the acts while someone else had photographed them.

The Corporal took more than a cus-

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: CORBIS/BETTMANN-UPI; FPG; DONG-A DAILY; DETAIL FROM ROGER SHIMOMURA, "AN AMERICAN DIARY" (1998)/STEINBAUM KRAUSS GALLERY



"I feel that I have at least one more unpublished novel in me."

• •

tomary delight in these pictures. He seemed to be drawn into their stark realism, as if he desired to inhabit them somehow. In the week or two after he had first shown them to me, I encountered him several times in the camp, and in each instance I found him further dishevelled in appearance, wholly unwashed and reeking most awfully, even more than the camp norm, the private journal clutched in his hands. His face had erupted in a sudden rash of pimples. He was, as I have said, callow and youthful, and, at nineteen, without much developed musculature or much hair on his lip. He was the youngest boy of a fairly prominent family in our town, and he had been trained in coded field communications to take advantage of his obvious intelligence and to avoid the likely consequences of his physical immaturity if he became an infantry regular, which, long before an enemy confronted him, would mean certain injury and possibly death at the punitive hands of superiors.

I took pity on him, though I was afraid that lurking beneath his quick mind was an instability, a defect of character which I was certain would lead him to a troubling circumstance. As one of the brigade's medical personnel, I decided to write a memorandum to Captain Ono, the physician-in-charge, advising that the Corporal be evaluated and possibly even relieved of his duties and disarmed, but, like almost everything else in wartime, the memo was lost, or ignored.

THIS was in the early fall of 1944, when it seemed that our forces were being routed across the entire region. Admiral Yamamoto's transport plane had been ambushed and destroyed by American fighter planes more than a year before, and the general mood, if still hopeful, was certainly not as ebullient as it had been in the high, early times of the war, when the Burma Road fell, and then Mandalay. And now, under regular threat of attack from British and American bombers—though, as if we'd been forgotten, none ever seemed to come for us—the behavior of the brigade, and most notably that of Corporal Endo, grew increasingly more extreme.

Late one evening, he came to my tent, behind the medical quarters, and asked if he could come inside and speak to me. He had washed up, and he looked much like the Corporal of old. Although I was weary and about to retire, it was clear that the Corporal was troubled. There was a trenchant, focussed look in his eyes, as if an idea had taken a profound hold over him and he was useless before it.

He didn't speak right away, and I asked him if I might help him with something.

He replied, "Please forgive me, Lieutenant. I'm rude to request a moment from you and then waste your time." He paused for a few seconds, and then went on. "You've been most generous to me, and I feel that my conduct has been inappropriate. There is no excuse. I feel ashamed of myself, so much so that I sometimes wish I were no longer living."

"There's no need for such a sentiment, Corporal Endo," I said, concerned by his words. "If your shame comes from showing some of your pictures to me, you must obviously know that it was always my choice to look at them. You did not force them on me."

"Yes, of course, Lieutenant," he answered, bowing his head at a supplicant angle. "I'm sorry, sir, for the implication. But, if you'll excuse me, it wasn't only the pictures I was talking about. Please forgive my insolence, but it is another thing that makes me feel desperate."

He paused again, folding his arms across his belly as though he were suddenly cold. Then he said, "You see, sir, it's about the new arrivals everyone has been talking about. It's known around camp that they're scheduled to be here soon, and I've received messages for the quartermaster that the supply transport will likely arrive by tomorrow."

"What about it, Corporal?"

"Well, sir, I've looked around camp yesterday and today, and I haven't been able to see where they'll be housed, once they're here. I thought that, as one of the medical officers, you might know."

"The housing of the female volunteers will no doubt be quickly determined, but not by me. I'm not in charge of their status or medical care. That will be Captain Ono's area, as he's the chief medical officer. Anyway, I don't see why this is your concern, Corporal."

The Corporal bobbed repeatedly, his face still quite serious. "Yes, sir. Should I then speak to Captain Ono?"

I didn't answer, as I was certain that I would grow annoyed if our conversation went on any longer. But I also feared that the Corporal might provoke Captain Ono. The Captain was a controlled man, almost grimly so, wound up within himself like a dense, impassable thicket. A week earlier, he had beaten a private nearly to death for accidentally brushing him as he passed on a narrow footpath near the latrines. Ono had ordered the man to kneel, and, in plain view of onlookers, beat him with the butt of his revolver, until the private was bloody and unconscious. He treated the man soon thereafter in the infirmary, saving his life with some quick surgical work to relieve the building pressure of blood on his brain. In fairness, it was an isolated act of violence. Still, I was concerned for Corporal Endo, and so I said to him, "Will you tell me what your interest in all this is? You won't find the Captain very patient, if he agrees to speak to you at all."

The young Corporal nodded gravely. "Yes, sir. I'm grateful for your advice. You see, sir, I was hoping that I could be among the first of those who might meet the volunteers when they arrive. If there is to be a greeting in the camp, for example, I would be honored to take part."

"Corporal Endo," I said sternly. "There will be no public greeting or reception of any kind. You ought to strike any such notion from your thoughts. As to meeting the female volunteers, it is the officer corps that will first inspect them. I'm new to this myself, but enlisted men, I've been informed, will be issued their tickets shortly thereafter, and it will be up to you to hold a place for yourself on the queue. I see you are most anxious to meet the volunteers, as most of the men will be when they learn of their arrival, but I suggest that you remain as circumspect as possible. I am also ordering you not to spread further news of their arrival. There will be time enough for foment in the camp. We don't need any beforehand."

"Yes, Lieutenant."

"The other piece of advice I have is that you put away all the picture cards you've collected. Don't look at them for a while. I believe you've developed an unhealthy dependence upon them. Do you think this may be true, Corporal?"

"Yes, sir," he said regretfully.

"Then take my advice. Bundle them up and put them in the bottom of your footlocker. Or perhaps destroy them. There's an atmosphere of malaise in the camp, and I believe it's partly due to a host of anticipations, both good and bad."

The Corporal nodded. "It's assumed among the men that the British and Americans will soon mount another major offensive, in the northern and eastern territories," he said.

"No doubt they will. As the commander instructed the officers last week, we must ready ourselves for death and suffering. When the female volunteers do arrive, perhaps it would be good if you make your own visitation. This is most regular. But keep in mind, Corporal Endo, the reasons we are here. As the commander, Colonel Ishii, has told us, it is our way of life that we're fighting for, and so it behooves each one of us to carry ourselves with dignity, in whatever we do. Try to remember this. I won't always be around to give you counsel."

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir."

"Is that all?"

"Yes, sir," he answered, rising to his feet. He bowed, but didn't lift his head immediately, and said, "Sir?"

"Corporal?"

"If I may ask, sir," he said weakly, almost as a boy would who already feared he knew the answer. "Will you be visiting the volunteers as well?"

"Naturally," I replied. "You may take your leave now, Corporal."

In truth, I hadn't yet thought of the question he'd posed, and for the rest of the night I wondered what I would do. I had wanted to assure the Corporal of the commonness of our procedures, and yet the imminent arrival of these "volunteers," as they were referred to, seemed quite removed from the ordinary. Certainly, I had heard of the mobilization of such a corps, in northern China and in the Philippines and on other islands, and, like everyone else, I appreciated the logic of deploying young women to maintain the morale of officers and foot soldiers in the field. And, like everyone else, I suppose, I assumed that it would be a familiar event, just one among the many thousands of details in a wartime camp. But when the day finally came, I realized that I had been mistaken.

THE convoy arrived a week later. It had been delayed by an ambush of native insurgents and had suffered significant damage and loss of supplies. There were at least a dozen men with serious injuries, three of whom were beyond help. Two trucks had been abandoned en route, and I remember the men crowding around the remaining truck, which bore sacks of rice and quantities of other foods, like pickled radishes and dried fish. At the time, we were still in contact with the supply line, and there were modest but decent rations available to us. It was clear, however, that the supplies were steadily growing sparser with each transport. The ambush had left the truck riddled with bullet holes, and one of the sergeants ordered a few of his men to pick the truck bed clean of every last grain of rice, which had drizzled out of holes in the burlap. The soldiers looked as if they were searching for grubs. It was a pathetic sight, particularly when the sergeant lined up the men after they finished and had them pour their scavengings into his cap, which he in turn presented to the presiding officer-in-charge.

I believe we had nearly forgotten what else had been expected, when a lone transport drove slowly up the road. It turned before reaching us in the central yard, and headed to the house of the commander, a small hut of palm wood and bamboo and thatch, situated at the far end of an expansive clearing. I could see that the doctor, Captain Ono, had just emerged from the commander's quarters and was standing at attention on a makeshift veranda. The driver stopped and folded down the back gate of the truck bed. He called into the dark hold and helped to the ground an older woman wearing a paper hat. She then turned to bark raspily inside. There was no answer and the woman shouted again, louder this time. The girls then climbed down from the truck, one by one, holding their hands above their eyes, shading them from the high Burmese light.

They were dressed like peasants, in baggy, crumpled white trousers and loose shirts. One might have thought they were young boys, were it not for their braided hair. The older woman and the driver pulled each girl by the arms as she descended and stood them in a row before the steps of the veranda. That there were only five of them seems remarkable to me now, given that there were nearly two hundred men in the encampment, but at the time I hadn't thought clearly about what was awaiting them in the coming days and nights. Like the rest of the men, I was simply struck by their presence, by the white shock of their oversized pants, their dirty, unshod feet, the narrowness of their hands and their throats. And soon enough the comprehension of what lay beneath the crumpled cotton shook me, as if I'd just heard an air-raid siren, and probably had the same effect on every other man standing at attention in that dusty clay field.

Captain Ono ordered the woman to march the girls up the steps. They looked frightened, and all but one ascended quickly to the veranda landing. The last one hesitated, though just momentarily, and the Captain stepped forward and struck her in the face with the back of his hand, sending her down to one knee. He did not seem particularly enraged. He then struck her again, and she fell back limply. She did not cry out. The older woman waited until Captain Ono withdrew before helping the girl up. The Captain knocked on the door. It was opened by the house servant and the Captain entered, followed by the older woman and the five young girls.

THAT night there was an unusually festive air in the camp. Groups of soldiers squatted outside their tents singing songs and trading stories in the temperate night air. There had been no ration of sake in the supply shipment except for a few large bottles for the officers, but the men didn't seem to mind. Strangely enough, Corporal Endo seemed to be the only one in a dark mood, and he sought me out as I took an evening walk. As I made my way along the camp's perimeter, listening to the rhythmic din of birds and insects calling out from the jungle, I thought of the sorry line of girls entering the house. They had spent the better part of the afternoon inside with the commander, shielded from the intense heat of the day. The Captain had come to the infirmary that afternoon to inform me of my new duties. He told me that, from the next day on, I and not he would be responsible for maintaining the readiness of the girls. Very soon the fighting would resume, he said with a chilling surety, and his time and skills would be required elsewhere. Since I was the paramedical officer—field-trained but not formally educated—it would be more than appropriate for me to handle their care. They were quite valuable, after all, to the well-being and morale of the camp, and vigilance would be in order.

Corporal Endo found me just short of the southeast checkpoint, beyond which our squads were regularly patrolling. To the left, one could see the faintest glimmers of light from the commander's hut, some fifty metres away, filtering through the half-cleared vegetation of the perimeter. There was no sound, just weak electric light glowing through the slats of the hut's bamboo shutters.

"Lieutenant, sir," Endo said, addressing me gloomily, "I've been thinking all afternoon about what's to come in the next days."

"You mean about the expected offensive from the enemy?"

"I suppose, yes, that, too," he said, regarding the light from the hut. "There's been much radio traffic lately. Almost all concerning where they'll strike, and when."

"Near here, and soon," I replied, echoing what Captain Ono had told me.

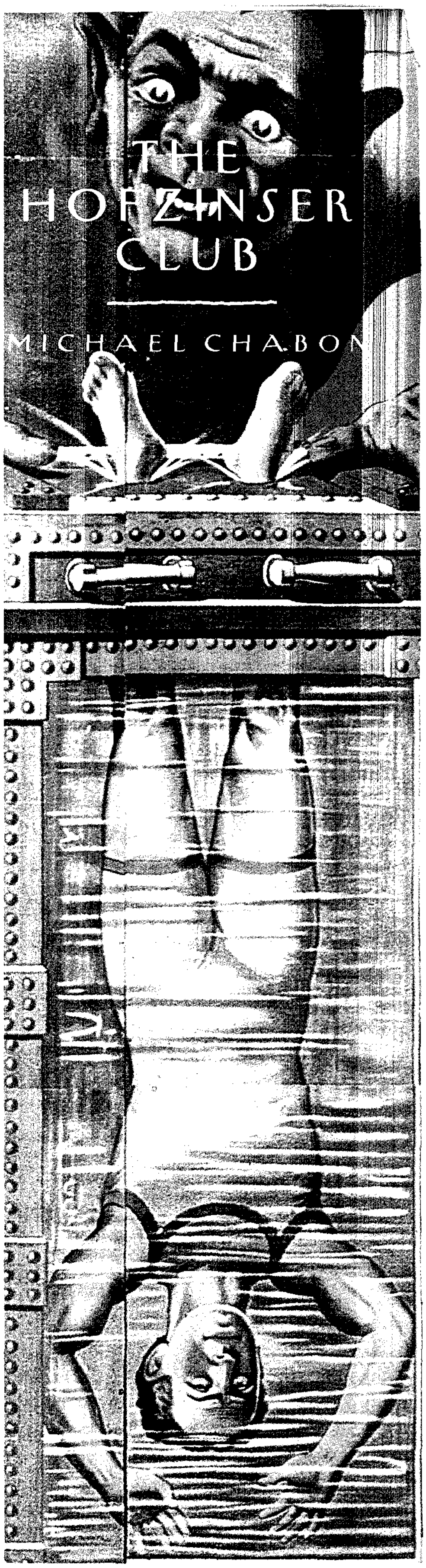
"Yes, sir," Endo said, "that seems to be the conclusion. But what I was thinking of mostly was the volunteers."

"You'll have your due turn," I said, annoyed that he was still preoccupied with the issue. "It will be a day or two or three, whatever is determined. In the meanwhile, you should keep yourself busy. It's an unhealthy anticipation that you are developing, Corporal."

"But if I can make myself clear, sir, it's not that way at all. I'm not thinking about when I'll see one of them. In fact, sir, I'm almost sure of *not* visiting. I won't seek their company at all."

This surprised me. "Of course, you're not required to," I said. "No one is."

"Yes, sir, I know," he said softly, following me as I made my way along the path back toward the main encampment, which led directly past the commander's hut. We walked for some time before he spoke again. "The fellows in the communications and munitions areas drew lots



THE HOFZINSER CLUB

MICHAEL CHABON

THE GRANGER COLLECTION

JOSEF KAVALIER'S determination to storm the exclusive Hofzinser Club of Prague took full form over breakfast one day in 1935, when he choked on a mouthful of omelette with apricot preserves. It was one of those rare mornings at the Kavalier flat—in a lacy, Secession-style building on a quiet square—when everyone sat down to breakfast together. Josef's father and mother, the two Doctors Kavalier, maintained full schedules and, like many busy parents, were inclined at once to neglect and to indulge their children. That morning, when Josef, the elder son, suddenly hunched forward, eyes watering, scrabbling for his napkin, his father reached out from behind his *Tageblatt* and idly pounded him on the back. His mother, without looking up from the latest number of *Monatschrift für Psychiatrie und Neurologie*, reminded Josef, for the thousandth time, not to bolt his food. Only little Thomas noticed, in the instant before Josef brought the napkin to his lips, the glint of something foreign in his brother's mouth. Getting up from the table, he went around to Josef's place and stared at his brother. Ignoring him, Josef tipped another forkful of omelette into his mouth.

"What is it?" Thomas said.

"What is what?" said Josef. He was a pale, freckled boy, black-haired, handsome, with a nose at once large and squashed-looking and wide-set blue eyes. "Go away."

"Have you lost a filling, Josef?" asked Miss Horne, Thomas's governess.

"He has something in his mouth," said Thomas. "It's shiny."

Josef stuck two fingers between his right cheek and upper right gum and pulled out a flat strip of metal, notched at one end: a tiny fork, no longer than Thomas's pinky.

"What is that?" his mother asked.

Josef shrugged. "A torque wrench," he said.

"What else?" said his father. "Of course it's a torque wrench."

"Herr Kornblum said I should get used to it," Josef explained. "He said that when Houdini died he was found to have worn away two pockets in his cheeks."

Herr Dr. Kavalier returned to his *Tageblatt*. "An admirable aspiration," he said.

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The five excerpted stories in this issue, including "The Hofzinser Club," will appear in their entirety in the next five issues.

this morning, to make things orderly, and by sheer chance I took first place among my rank. There was much gibing and joking about it, and some of the fellows offered me cigarettes and fruit if I would trade with them. I had to leave the tent then, and they probably thought I was being a bad winner."

We had reached the point on the path which was closest to the hut. The sentry noticed us and let us pass; he was a private I had recently treated for a mild case of dysentery. Again there was hardly a sound save the sharp, high songs of the nighttime fauna.

"So why did you leave?" I asked.

"You see, sir," he continued, "I've decided not to visit those girls. I don't really know why, because it's true that every day I've been in this miserable situation I've been thinking about being with a woman, any woman. But yesterday, after I saw them arrive in the camp, I suddenly stopped wanting that. I know I must be sick, Lieutenant. I do in fact feel sick, but I didn't come to ask for any treatment or advice. I don't want my lot anymore, but I don't want any of the others to have it, either. So I thought I could ask you to hold it for me, so none of the fellows can get to it."

He then showed me a torn-edged chit, a tiny, triangular bit of rice paper with a scribble on one side. It was nothing. His fellows would certainly just jostle for their places when the time came, chits or not. But the Corporal handed the scrap to me as if it were the last ashes of an ancestor. I thought for a moment that he had deceived me about his virginity and was suffering from an untreated syphilitic infection, but I saw only the straining earnestness of his narrow, boyish face.

I unbuttoned the chest pocket of my shirt and deposited the bit of paper. I said nothing to the Corporal. He was genuinely grateful and relieved, and he bowed almost wistfully before me, making me feel as though I had indeed come to his aid, that I had helped save him from whatever fate he imagined would befall him were he to visit the ones delivered for our final solace and pleasure. And I recall understanding this last notion. For although it was true that the talk throughout the camp was still of the glorious brightness of our ultimate victory, the surer truth, as yet unspoken, was that we were now facing our demise. Famous, of course, is the resolve of the Japanese soldier, the lore of his tenacity and courage and willingness to fight in the breach of certain death, but I will say, too, that for every man who showed no fear there were three or four or five others whose mettle was as unashamedly wan and mortal as yours or mine. As the defenders of the most far-flung sector of the occupied territory, we had little question about the terrible hours ahead of us. It was a startlingly real possibility that every man in the camp would soon be dead.

I guided Corporal Endo quickly past the commander's hut, his gaze almost rigidly locked upon the shuttered windows. We had gone some thirty paces when he grabbed me roughly by the shoulder.

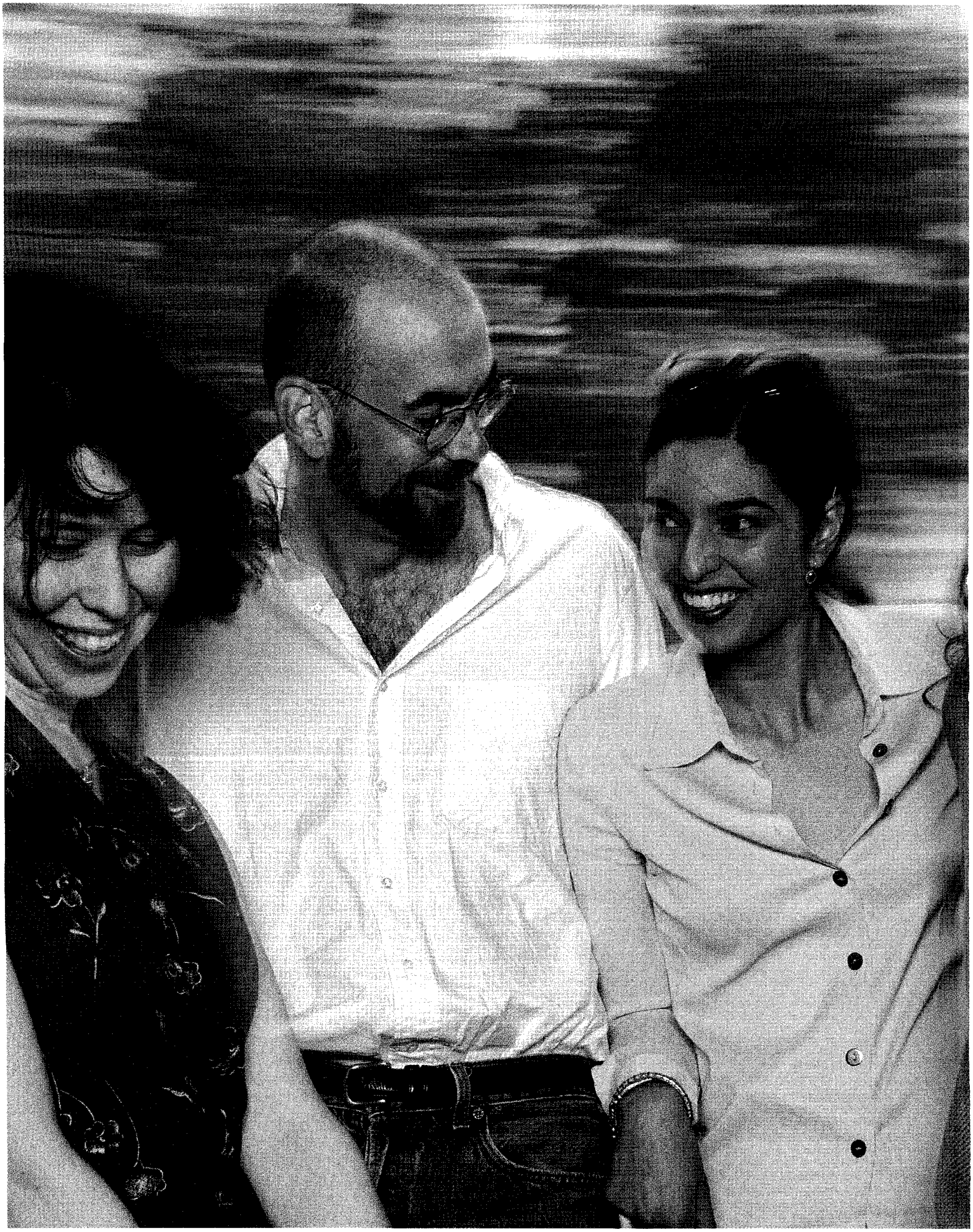
I looked up and saw that the door had opened. A man stood on the open porch, his hands on his hips. He seemed to be surveying the darkened compound, and the Corporal and I both stopped in our tracks, trying not to make a sound. From the silhouette it was clearly the commander, Colonel Ishii, with his thick torso and bowlegs and the distinctly squared-off shape of his head. He was naked, and he was inhaling and exhaling deeply from his belly. These days people might call the commander a health nut, and some of his ministrations were quite peculiar. He would exercise vigorously in the early morning, an intense regimen of calisthenics and stretching which would challenge a seasoned drill sergeant. Then, sweating like a plow ox, he would deliberately allow himself to be bitten by swarms of mosquitoes, letting the ravenous insects feed freely on his belly and chest and back. It was a way of bleeding himself. One would assume he'd have suffered terribly from malaria, but he seemed perfectly fit.

The commander took a step down and I thought he must have seen us. I was ready to address him to avoid seeming as if we were trying to conceal ourselves in the darkness, but then he bent down to peer beneath the floorboards of the hut, which was set up off the ground on short posts. After a moment's inspection, he straightened and began speaking down into the crawl space, his tone eerily gentle, as if he were addressing a favorite niece who was misbehaving.

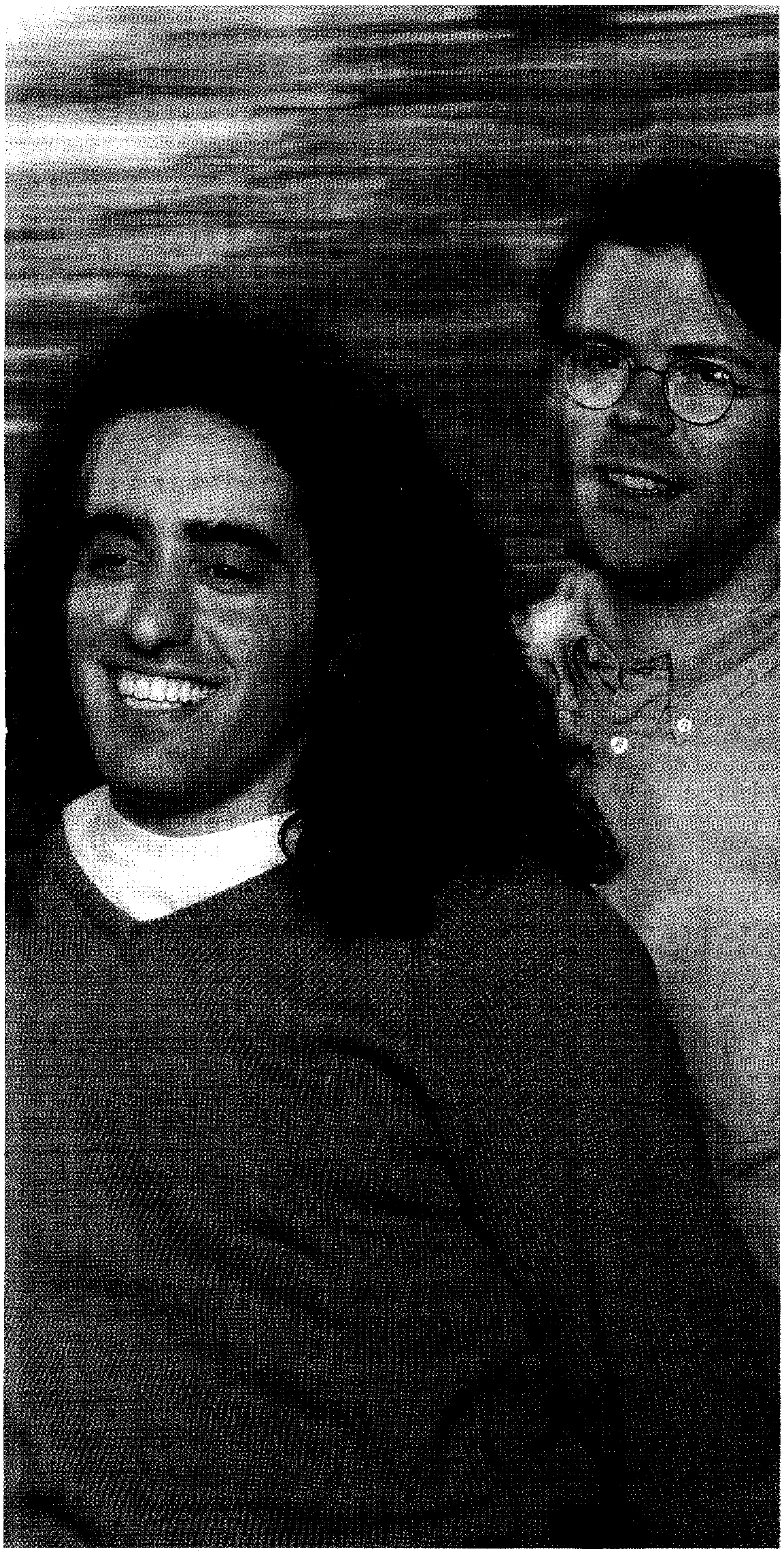
"There is little reason to hide anymore. It's all done now. It's silly to think otherwise. You will come out and join your companions."

There was no answer.

"You must come out sometime," he



Left to right: Allegra Goodman, Donald Antrim, Jhumpa Lahiri, Nathan Englander, and Jonathan Franzen. Photograph by Chris Callis.



continued. "I suppose it's more comfortable under there than out in the jungle. I can understand that. But you know there is food inside now. The cook has made some rice balls. The others are eating them as we speak."

"I want to be with my sister," a young voice replied miserably. She was speaking awkwardly, in Japanese, with some Korean words mixed in. I hadn't heard much of that language since my childhood, and I found myself suspended, anticipating the old tenor of the words. "I want to know where she is," the girl said. "I must know. I won't come out until I know."

"She's with the camp doctor," the commander said. "She's having her ear looked at. The doctor wanted to make sure she was all right."

I wondered whether the girl knew that the doctor was the same man who had struck her sister down. There was a pause, and the commander simply stood there in his blunt nakedness, the strangest picture of tolerance.

I heard the girl's weak reply. "I promised my mother we would always stay together," she said.

The commander said to her, "That should be so. You are good to try to keep such a promise. But how can you do so from down there? Your sister will be back with you tomorrow. For now, you must come out, right at this moment. Right at this moment. I won't wait any longer."

Something must have shifted in his voice, a different note that only she could hear, for she came out, scuttling forward on her hands and knees. When she reached the open air she didn't get up but stayed crumpled at his feet. She was naked, too. The clouds had scattered, and in the dim violet moonlight the sight of them, if you did not know the truth, was almost a thing of beauty, a painter's scene, conjured to address the subject of a difficult love. The commander offered his hand and the girl took it and pulled herself up, her posture bent and tentative as though she were ill. She was crying softly. He guided her to the step of the porch, and it was there that her legs lost their power and she collapsed. The commander grabbed her wrist and barked at her to get up, the sharp report of his voice sundering the air, but she didn't move. She was sobbing wearily for her sister, and I understood that she was calling her sister's name, "Kku-taeh," which, I knew, meant bottom, or last.

The Colonel made a low grunt and

jerked the girl up by her wrist. It looked as if he were dragging a skinned calf. He got her inside and a peal of cries went up. He shouted for quiet with a sudden, terrible edge in his voice. Meanwhile, the sentry had heard the outburst and run around to the front, instinctively levelling his rifle on us as he came forward. As I raised my hands, the sentry yelled "Hey there!" and I realized that Corporal Endo, inexplicably, had begun to sprint back into the darkness of the jungle.

I shouted "Don't shoot!" but the sentry had already fired once in our direction. The shot flew past well above me, though I could feel it bore through the heavy air. There was little chance that it could have hit the Corporal, or anyone else. The sentry seemed shocked at his own reaction, however, and dropped his rifle. I was relieved, but the commander had already come out of the house, his robe hastily wrapped around his middle, a shiny pistol in his hands. Over the sentry's shoulder I could see the commander take aim from the veranda and fire twice. Then a questioning, half-bemused expression flitted across the sentry's face, and he fell to the ground.

The commander walked over and motioned to me with the gun to let down my hands. He had recognized me as the doctor's assistant. "Lieutenant Kurohata," he said almost kindly, not even looking down at the sentry's body. I knew the man was dead: one of the bullets had struck him in the neck and torn away a section of his carotid artery. The ground was slowly soaking up his blood. "You are a medical man, are you not?" the colonel said. Up close he was more inebriated than I had surmised, his eyes sleepy and opaque. "You can help me then, I hope, with a small confusion I was having this evening."

He paused, as if trying to remember what he was saying, and in the background I could hear the chaotic shouts of orders and footfalls coming from the main camp. I replied, "However I am able, sir."

"What? Oh, yes. You can aid me with something. I was being entertained this evening, as you may know, and it occurred to me that there was a chance of . . . a complication. You know what I'm talking about, Lieutenant?"

"Yes, sir," I said, though in fact I had no idea.

"They are young, after all, and likely fertile." He paused a moment, and said, as if in an aside, "And, of course, being virginal, that can't protect them, can it?"

"No, sir."

"Of course not," he concurred, as if I had asked him the question.

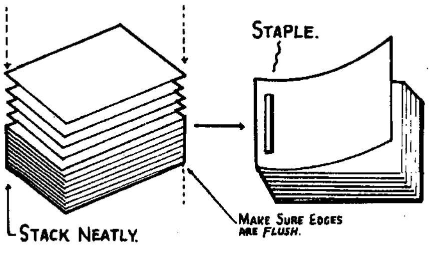
The commander's query surprised me. He was in his mid-thirties, which is not old in the world, but this late in the war he was practically ancient; I thought that he would have known—unlike Endo and myself—the many ways of women and amour, and yet he seemed to be even more ignorant of them than we were. He crossed his arms in an almost casual pose, though he kept a tight hold on the pistol, which poked out beneath one folded arm. "One grows up with all kinds of apocrypha and lore, yes? I mean us men. A young woman naturally receives guidance about such matters, estimable information, while it seems we are left on our own, each by each and one by one. To our own devices."

At that moment a squad of armed men came running up to us. The commander raised his free hand and waved them forward. The squad leader, a corporal, seemed shocked to find the lifeless body of the sentry lying in awkward repose by our feet.

"Remove him," the commander said. Two of the men lifted up the corpse by his armpits and calves. Someone gathered the dropped rifle and the bloody cap. As they left, I realized that neither the commander nor I had spoken a word of explanation to the men, nor had any of them even whispered a question.

"You'll look after this," the commander said to me matter-of-factly, referring, I understood immediately, to the death report, which was filled out whenever time and circumstances allowed. The next day I would note in the necessary form that the sentry, a Private Ozaki, had been shot dead by a forward sniper who was sought out by our patrols but never found.

I bowed curtly and the commander acknowledged me with a grunt. I waited while he ascended the low porch and went inside. As I started back for my own tent, I could hear him speaking again, in a calm, unagitated tone. "Look at my girls," I heard him saying, repeating himself slowly, with a sort of wonder, like a father who has been away much too long. "Look here at my girls."

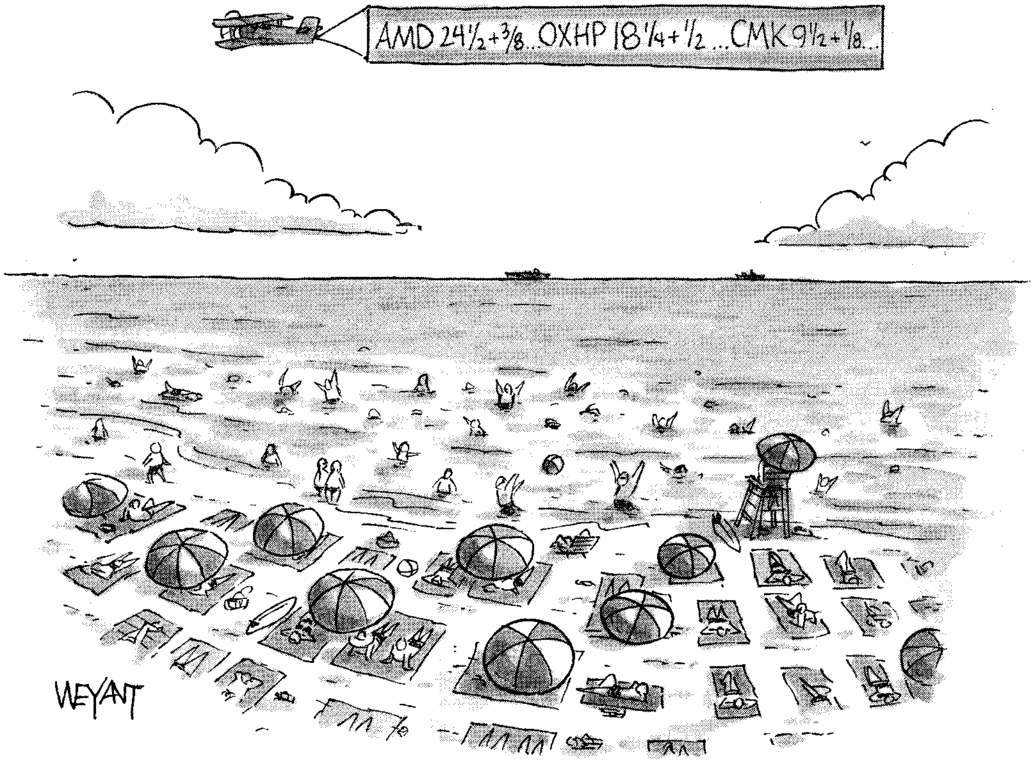

STAPLE.
STACK NEATLY.
MAKE SURE EDGES ARE FLUSH.

By midmorning the day was already muggy and bright. I hadn't gone in search of Corporal Endo the night before, nor did I have any interest in doing so amid the early bustle of the day. No one knew that he had inadvertently instigated the shooting, or that he had even been present. When it was announced that patrols would be increased to prevent further sniping, I hoped he would keep quiet and let the event pass. The commander, whom I saw during his morning exercise, seemed fresh and fit.

That afternoon, the commander relinquished the girls to my care. I ordered that they be housed temporarily in one of the barracks, displacing a handful of men. A receiving house was being built by a crew of native tradesmen, who were following specifications provided by Captain Ono. I was to oversee this as well, but there was little left to be done.

The comfort house, which is how it was known, was a narrow structure with five doorways, each with a rod across the top for a sheet that would be hung as a privacy screen. The whole thing was perhaps as long as a large transport truck, ten metres or so. There were five compartments, of course, one for each of the girls; these were tiny, windowless rooms, no more than the space of one and a half tatami mats. In the middle of each space was a wide plank of wood meant for lying down on. The plank was widest where the shoulders would be, and then it narrowed again for the head, so that its shape was like the lid of an extra-broad coffin. This is where the girls would receive the men. After their duties were over, they would sleep where they could in the compartment. They would take their meals with the older Japanese woman, who was already living in her own small tent, behind the comfort house. She would prepare their food and keep hold of their visitors' tickets and make sure they had enough of the things a young woman might need, to keep herself in a minimally respectable way.

I alone was responsible for their health. The girls' well-being aside, I was to make certain they could perform their duties for the men in the camp. The greatest challenge, of course, would be



preventing them from contracting venereal disease. It was well known what an intractable problem this was in the first years of fighting, particularly in Manchuria, when it might happen that two out of every three men were stricken and rendered useless for battle. In those initial years there had been comfort houses set up with former prostitutes shipped in from Japan by Army-sanctioned merchants, and the infection rate was naturally high. Now that the comfort stations were run under military ordinances and the women were not professionals but, rather, those who had unwittingly enlisted or had been forcibly conscripted into the wartime women's volunteer corps, the expectation was that disease would be kept in check. Most of the volunteers were not Japanese, of course, just normal girls from Korea and China and wherever else they could be found. Now it was the men who were problematic, and there was a stiff penalty for anyone known to be infected who did not seek treatment beforehand. I had one of the sergeants announce final call for the camp in this regard, as I hoped to quarantine anyone who might infect a girl. Only two men came forward complaining of symptoms, both of whom were in the ward already.

I was to examine the girls and state their fitness for their duties. I had put on a doctor's coat and was waiting for the women to be brought to the infirmary. The intense heat of the day seemed to treble inside the room, and my stiff white coat was another layer over my regular uniform. I hadn't eaten anything yet that day, because of the sticking temperature and a crabbed feeling of an incipient illness.

The older woman, Mrs. Matsui, poked her head in the open doorway and bowed several times. She was pale and pock-faced and dressed in the tawdry, overly shiny garb of a woman who had obviously once been in the trade. She was clearly, too, a full Japanese, and the fact of this bothered me now, to have to see her cheapness against the line of modest girls who trailed her.

They were all fairly young, ranging from sixteen to twenty-one. At the head was a tallish girl with a dark mole on her cheek. The two beside her were more retiring in their appearance, their eyes averted from me; they seemed to be clinging to one another, though they weren't touching at all. The next girl, I realized, was the one who had hidden beneath the commander's hut. She had a firm hold of the hand of the girl behind her, whom I realized must be her sister, the one she called Kku-taeh.

She was the only one who gazed directly at me. She met my eyes as someone might on any public bus or trolley car, though her regard was instantly fixing and cool. She had a wide, oval-shaped face, and there was some bruising along the side of her jaw and upper neck. She had been housed with Captain Ono while the rest of them had gone on to entertain the commander; the doctor had reserved her, implying to the commander that she was not a virgin like the others, who would offer him the ineffable effects of their maidenhood, which to a soldier is like an amulet of life and rebirth.

I told Mrs. Matsui to ready the girls for examination and she ordered them to remove their clothing. They were slow to do so and she went up to the girl with the mole and tore at her hair. The girl complied and the rest of them began to disrobe. I did not watch them. I stood at the table with a writing board and the sheets of paper for recording their medical histories and periodic examinations. There was special paperwork for everything, and it was no different for the young women of the comfort house. The girl with the mole came to me first. I nodded to the table and she lifted herself up gingerly. She was naked and in the bright afternoon light coming from the slatted window her youthful skin was practically luminous, as though she were somehow lit from inside. For a moment I was transfixed by the strangeness of it all, the sheer exposed figure of the girl and then the four others who stood covering themselves with their hands, their half-real, half-phantom nearness, which I thought must be like the allure of pornography for Corporal Endo. But then Mrs. Matsui came around the front of the girl on the exam table and without any prompting from me spread her knees apart.

"You'll probably see they're all a bit raw today," she said hoarsely, like a monger with her morning's call. "Nothing like the first time, right? But you'll believe me when I say they'll be used to it by tomorrow."

Her cloying tone and familiarity put me off, but she was right. The girl's privates were terribly swollen and bruised, and there were dried smears of crimson-tinged discharge on her thighs and underside. Mrs. Matsui had just delivered the four of them from the commander's hut, and the faint, sour odors of dried sweat and spilled rice wine and blood and sexual relations emanated from the girl. When I reached to examine her more closely, she curled her hips away and began whimpering. Mrs. Matsui held her steady, but I didn't touch her then. I inspected the others; I didn't touch them, either, and the condition was more or less the same. I was just beginning to examine the last one, Kku-taeh, when the door swung open. It was the doctor, in his fatigues, entering the room.

"What do you think you are doing?" Ono said sharply, staring at Kku-taeh.

I answered, "The required examinations, Captain. I've nearly completed them, and I'll have the records for you shortly."

"I don't need *records* from you," he said, not hiding his irritation. He pushed Mrs. Matsui aside, then took hold of the girl by the back of her neck. Her shoulders tightened at his touch. He was applying subtle pressure, enough that she was wincing slightly, though not letting herself cry out.

"I need order from you, Lieutenant. Order and adherence to our code. What appears to elude you is the application of principle. The true officer understands this. You examined them, yes. But in doing so you abandoned far more important principles. This examination room, for example, is a disgrace and besmirchment upon our practice." He nodded at the clothes in piles on the floor. "You follow your duties but your conduct is so often meddling. In truth, I remain unconvinced of you. Now you'll get them out of here and ready for receiving the officer corps tonight. The comfort house is done?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then you can leave the examination room, Lieutenant."

"Captain, sir," I said, glancing at the girl beside him. She was stony-faced and grimly silent. "I have not yet completed the examinations."

The doctor was still staring at Kku-taeh, not acknowledging my statement. Already he seemed to consider us gone. I had known from the first moment I met him that he was a man of singular resolve, and even hardness, particularly when it came to the care of his patients, and I had always admired him for this. He had a wife and a young child back in Japan, whose attractive portraits he kept on his desk. Those portraits had been steady witness to numerous bloody surgical procedures, and I thought that anyone else would surely have retired them to a private cabinet. And now he had a girl unclothed on the table, and he was pushing her to lie down on her back, his drawn, unhumored face hovering above her shallow belly.

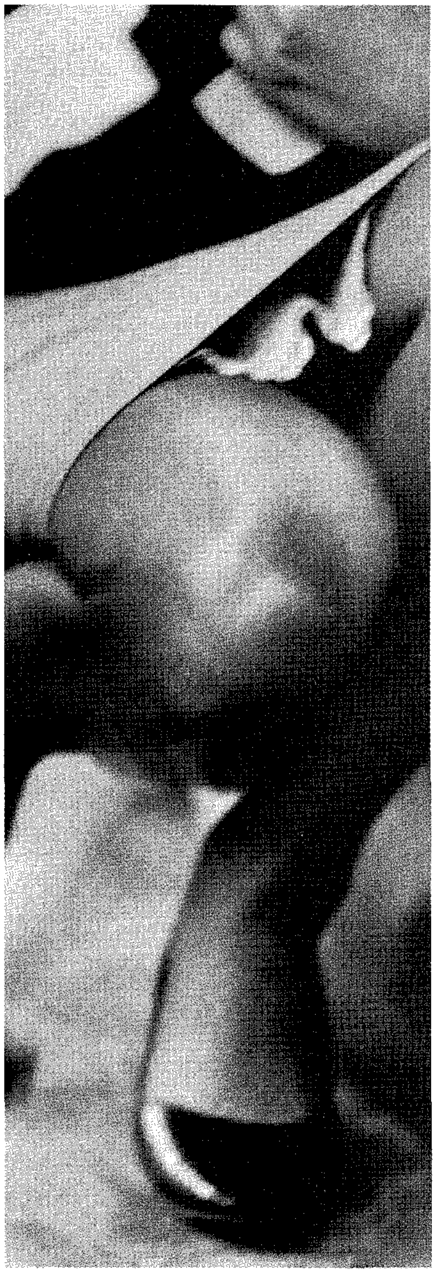
Mrs. Matsui gathered the rest of the girls, trying to quiet Kku-taeh's sister, who refused to leave the room, with a quick slap. The three other girls had to work together to drag her out. On the table, Kku-taeh remained oddly unmoved, almost dead to her and everything else. I removed my white coat, and left it folded on the desk chair. When I shut the door I did not look back into the room.

I WAS relieved to be outside. I stopped at the enlisted mess tent, and the steward there offered to prepare me a cup of tea. I sat on an upended crate and waited, welcoming the small kindness. In the corner of my vision Mrs. Matsui and the others were half carrying the hysterical girl toward the comfort house, which seemed, being so newly built, a lone clean island in the growing fetor of the camp. With dusk, I knew, the officers would recommence their visitations.

I also noticed what I thought to be the slight figure of Corporal Endo, crouched at the far end of the central yard, where it gave way to dense jungle. He was sitting back on his haunches, his canvas radioman's cap pinched down over his brow to shade his eyes from the fierce daylight. He must have seen me, but he did not wave or make a gesture; he appeared to be surveying the goings on, particularly the troop of girls making their way to Mrs. Matsui's tent behind the comfort house. Perhaps he had been waiting for them to come out from the medical hut, or perhaps he had just then crouched to rest. Whatever the case, he would never tell me or anyone else. Even now, more than fifty years afterward, I wonder what might have come of Endo had the following events not occurred. Would he have married? Would he have had children? Or would he have lived a solitary life, as I have, and known only the scantest taste of a woman's love? And even now what he did next remains a mystery to me, and I remain useless be-

VINS FINS

ETHAN CANIN



BERNARD PLOSSU, DETAIL FROM "UNTITLED" (1966)/METIS

THE autumn I was seventeen Richard Nixon made a visit to our town, at the western edge of Cape Cod, and I went to see him with my father, who thought the President of the United States would weather Watergate like any other storm, and with my mother, who was waiting for him to fall. This was in 1973. In June of the year before, five men had been caught behind a locked door at the Democratic

National Committee headquarters, in the Watergate Hotel; in September, Spiro Agnew claimed the incident was a setup; in October, the Washington *Post* said it had actually been controlled and paid for by the Attorney General. In November, my father sold a French restaurant near Plymouth, Massachusetts, and moved my mother and me fifteen miles south, onto the wide, landward edge of Cape Cod, at about the same time Nixon himself began drawing his own guard in around him.

For most of my life my father had been opening and closing French bistros in New England, starting in Manchester, New Hampshire, and moving us south and east every year or so, ahead of a string of break-evens and failures and a few flamboyant successes that left him flush with money and hope. Even if the restaurants were profitable, he closed them—he knew that almost all of them would fail eventually—selling the checkered-tablecloth establishments to Canadian families and the white-tablecloth ones to the South Boston investors who followed him like hyenas in worsted suits. My father made money and lost money more or less evenly over the course of his life, but in the end he was more afraid of dying penniless, he once told me, than he was hopeful of getting rich. Every businessman has a flaw, he used to say, and every business is doomed. Timing was everything.

My father was a stern man of constant pedagogy, but restless, and in middle age he grew to possess a stormy temperament that combined with his headlong optimism in a way that made him very persuasive to an adolescent boy. From the age of eleven I had been the dishwasher in his restaurants. He had taught me to work hard, to open every door, to move on without fear. I listened to the hard-bitten philosophy he offered as he cooked, and I counted the entrées he sold by the plates that came in. His dark moods I learned to respect. His optimism I craved, though I think I suspected even then that I would never truly know it myself. He was the son of a diemaker for Mid-Continental Electric Motor, in Dearborn, Michigan, and unambivalent about what he wanted. There was money in America; it was a few miles east of us and a few months down the road. That's where we were going. ◆

The five excerpted stories in this issue, including "Vins Fins," will appear in their entirety in the next five issues.

fore the memory, inert with fascination and dread. I keep revisiting the scene, turning it over, again and again, like one of Endo's tattered picture cards.

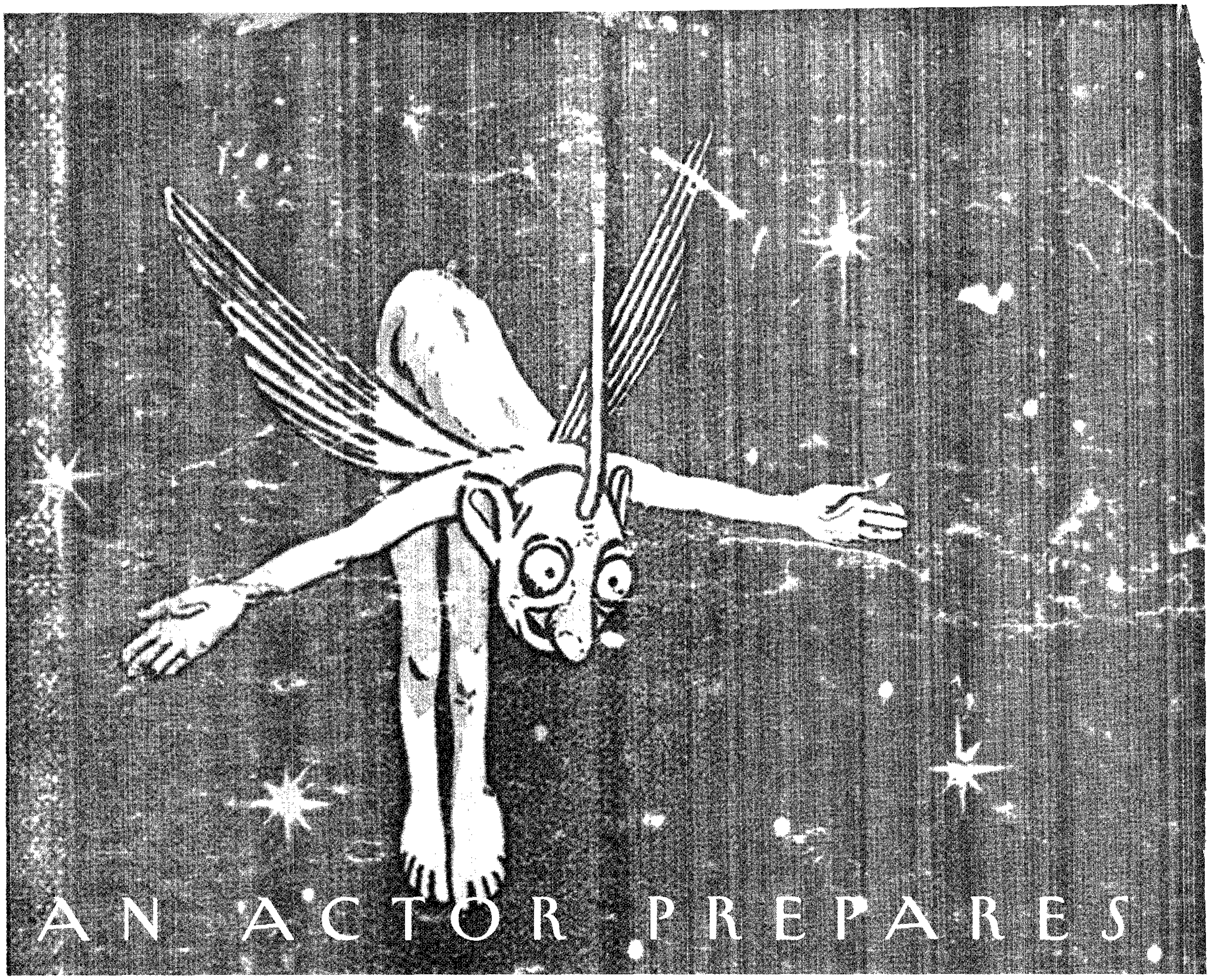
He rose from his crouch and began to trot toward Mrs. Matsui and the girls. The distance between them was not great, perhaps sixty or seventy metres, and I was able to see the whole event, from start to end. The Corporal was not a natural runner, and he appeared to be awkwardly exercising, though hardly a soul was exerting himself any more than was necessary those days. Some small part of me probably fathomed what he intended, and yet I simply watched like a disinterested spectator, whose sudden glint of prescience is somehow self-fulfilling.

The Corporal approached and ordered the women to halt. I could barely hear what was said, though I could gather that Mrs. Matsui was objecting to what Endo seemed to want, which was an immediate private audience with one of the girls. Mrs. Matsui was pointing toward the medical hut, but he pushed her aside. The three girls who had been supporting Kku-taeh's sister backed away, and she fell weakly to her knees; it was Endo who raised her up with a stiff pull. She was not fighting him; in fact, her movement seemed to lighten, as if he were an old acquaintance and she were pleased to see him. Some men had noticed the commotion and were calling to him, asking what he was up to, what he was doing, shouting it in a hearty, knowing way. He ignored them and dragged the girl along, quickly arriving at his original position at the edge of the bush. After the two of them disappeared into the dense foliage and had not returned for several minutes, the corporals and privates working near the trucks began to jog over, and it was then that I knew something irregular had occurred. I slipped beneath the netting of the mess tent and slowly made my way across the dusty red clay of the yard, past the officers' quarters and latrines, then past the narrow comfort house, its walls rough-hewn and smelling of fresh-cut wood, to where the canopy rose up again and the shade cooled the air. My legs felt unbearably heavy. The half-dozen or so men were gathered there, in the trodden entrance of a patrol trail, the couple in their midst, Endo sitting on the ground with the girl lying beside him.

Her throat was slashed, deeply, very near the bone. She had probably died in less than a minute. There was much blood, naturally, but it was almost wholly pooled in a broad blot beneath her, the dry red earth turned a rich hue of brown. There was little blood on her person, hardly a spatter or speck anywhere save on her collar and on the tops of her shoulders. It was as though she had gently lain down for him and calmly waited for the cut. The oddity was that he was unsoiled as well, completely untouched. There was nothing even on his hands, with which he was rubbing his close-shaven head. I asked him what had happened, but he did not seem to hear me. He sat there, his knees splayed out, his cap fallen off, an errant expression on his face, like that of a man who has seen his other self.

Finally, someone asked me what they ought to do, and, as I held rank, I told the men to take Corporal Endo under arms to the officer-in-charge. I recall, now, having remained at the trail after Endo had been escorted away. I ordered the rest of the men to fetch a stretcher for the girl's body, and for a few moments I was left alone with her. In the sudden quiet of the glade I felt I should kneel down. Her eyes were open, coal-dark but still bright. She did not look fearful or sad. And, for the first time, I appreciated what she truly looked like, the delicate cast of her young girl's face.

Endo was kept under close watch that night, and after a brief interrogation by Captain Ono he confessed to the deed. The following morning, just after dawn, in front of the entire garrison, he was executed. Mrs. Matsui was present, as was Kku-taeh, who looked upon the proceedings coldly. She stood aside from the other girls. The officer-in-charge announced that Endo had been charged not with murder but with treasonous action against the corps. He should be considered as guilty as any saboteur who had stolen or despoiled the camp's armament or rations. Endo looked small and frail; he was so frightened he could hardly walk. He had to be helped to the spot where he would kneel. By custom he was then offered a blade, but he dropped it before he could pierce his belly, retching instead. The swordsman standing beside him did not hesitate and struck him cleanly. Endo's headless body pitched lightly forward, his delicate hands outstretched, as if to break his fall. ◆



AN ACTOR PREPARES

DONALD ANTRIM

LEE STRASBERG, a founder of the Group Theatre and the great teacher of the American Method, famously advised his students never to "use"—for generating tears, etc., in a dramatic scene—personal/historical material less than seven years in the personal/historical past; otherwise, the Emotion Memory (the death of a loved one or some like event in the actor's life that can, when evoked through recall and substitution, hurl open the floodgates, as they say, right on cue, night after night, even during a long run)—this material, being *too close*, as it were, might overwhelm the artist and compromise the total control required to act the part or, more to the point, act it well; might, in fact, destabilize the play; if, for instance, at the moment in a scene when it becomes necessary for Nina or Gertrude or Macduff to wipe away tears and get on with life; if, at that moment, it becomes impossible for a wailing performer to pull it together; if, in other words, the *performer* remains trapped in affect long after the *character* has moved on to dinner or the battlefield—when this happens, then you can be sure that delirious theatrical mayhem will follow.

What is the point in all this? Strasberg was wrong. Seven years are not enough, a fact I discovered recently during a twilight performance of "A Midsummer Night's Dream," presented on the college green to commemorate the founding, a hundred and fifty years ago, by the Reverend William Trevor Barry—my great-great-grandfather on my father's side—of the small liberal-arts institution that bears our family's name and our seal. I am Reginald Barry, Dean of Student Life and Wm. T. Barry Professor of Speech and Drama at Barry College, so naturally it fell to me to direct our commemorative, barefoot production of Shakespeare's great festive comedy. While I was at it, I decided to serve up some ham myself, as Lysander. What would a skinny, balding, unmarried, and childless forty-six-year-old Lysander—a Ph.D. with hair on his back—*mean* within the context of an otherwise college-age show? I'm not sure I can answer that question. Normally, Lysander would be essayed by some good-looking lacrosse goalie waiting his turn to date-rape the beautiful, waifish Mary Victoria Frost, our Hermia, only a sophomore herself and already the finest actress we've had in my time at Barry, a sure candidate for Yale or Juilliard if she can ease off the drugs. I might stand in as Egeus or Theseus, or maybe Oberon, King of the Faeries, if I felt up to it. But high-concept casting is a director's prerogative. Two seasons ago, we mounted an all-male, all-nude "Taming of the Shrew." People said it really increased their appreciation for the radical potentials in Elizabethan drama.

And so, the play. Four adolescents turned out by law and their parents into a green world governed by spooks, all playing—children and their phantoms—at love and nighttime evil.

The adolescents were me, Mary Vic-

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toria Frost, Sheila Tannenbaum, as Helena, and Billy Valentine, as Demetrius. Sheila, a junior, plays character parts when she's not playing basketball for the Lady Bears, and I knew she'd make an acceptable if not entirely agreeable Helena, with her big hands and lurching walk and brown eyes too far apart on an otherwise bent-looking, asymmetrical face; but Valentine represented a casting risk. Valentine is a certain kind of blond-haired, upper-middle-class boy—the type is familiar at any private school in the land, I would imagine—a sarcastic, wiry little underachiever who, on the basis of no evidence, is rumored among his peers to be a genius.

"Don't come to rehearsals stoned, Billy," I warned this kid before first read-through.

"*Stoned*, Mr. Barry?" He laughed. The previous Friday, a bunch of us had found ourselves lying around on the sofas in my office in Lower Hancock, getting wasted on some of Billy's very strong homegrown.

"We're here to work," I told him now, and he said, "Don't you think I should be playing Puck?"

"You want to direct this show, Valentine?" I asked him. "No? Then let me worry about casting."

"Hey, Mr. Barry. Everything's cool. It's just that Martin can't read his script. I mean, he can't *see*."

Billy Valentine had a point. Putting Martin Epps in as Puck was like putting, well, I don't know what into what. How can you defend a totally blind Robin Goodfellow tapping his way around the stage with a telescoping cane, except in theory?

Dramaturgically speaking, the theory was sound enough, I thought; and so I opened up rehearsals by reciting it—in somewhat oblique form—to my cast. There they were, the "drama mafia," down in the windowless Hancock Hall basement, twenty-five or thirty hungover Lovers, Royals, Spirit Wraiths, Merry Men, stagehands, set techies, and walk-ons, all dressed in late-spring cut-offs and oxford-cloth shirts and sheer halter tops, almost every one of this lot—except Martin Epps, the blind boy—inhaling drags off cigarettes; it was a bored, blasé-looking crowd. "Genuine vision, expressed artistically by Shakespeare in the character Puck, is more than the ability to open your eyes, take a look around, and see what's wrong with your life," I announced to these oversexed dope addicts.

No one spoke or even looked up, and I had that terrible feeling I get at the kickoff to any rehearsal period, when I realize how much disappointment lies ahead. I said, "Well, anyway, Theseus, it's your line to start the play."

Still no one spoke. "Danielle, do you have the cast list?" I asked my sophomore stage manager.

"Hang on, Mr. Barry, it's here somewhere."

"Call me Reg," I told her. "During the play, we're all equals."

She stared at me like she wasn't quite sure. Unorthodox etiquette is often perplexing for the young. She held up the cast list and waved it—apparently some kind of "theatrical" gesture—in the air over her head. "Greg Lippincott, you're Theseus."

"Oh, is that how 'Theseus' is pronounced?" Greg asked. It was hard to believe he was one of the Philadelphia Lippincotts. He took a puff from his cigarette. Snickering could be heard. It took four hours to complete the read-through. Danielle delivered Martin Epps's lines to him, and Martin repeated each back, painstakingly, one word then the next, like a spy being briefed on a plan.

"I'll put a girdle round about the earth in forty minutes," recited Danielle.

"I'll. Put. A girdle. Round about the earth. In forty minutes," said Martin.

I made a note to ask him to pick up the pace and not tap cadences on the floor with his cane. I made another note, to Jim Ferguson, warning him to avoid inserting "like" into Oberon's speeches to Titania. I worried about telling the faeries and goblins that their costumes would consist of G-strings and pasties.

I can always give thanks, in these delicate situations, for our costumer, my girlfriend, Carol.

Carol came in later in the week, during our first walk-through rehearsal, and made the case for her skimpy outfits.

"I think we will be able to see from their attire that these faeries are playful and very dangerous, earthy yet devilish, with a heightened insistence on gender that not only subverts our own male-dominated culture but underscores the young lovers' cruelty toward one another in the Athenian grove," she announced while staring straight at me. Was it necessary for Carol to see *everything* as a reflection of the sexual antagonisms in our on-again, off-again relationship?

She held the faerie sketches—Cobweb, Peaseblossom, Moth, and Mustardseed—up in glaring overhead light. A girl wearing shorts and a T-shirt objected: "No way. I'm not going out there naked."

"This is the theatre, honey. The character is naked, not you."

"Good point, Carol," I interjected, unwisely. Carol gave me one of her furious looks, reminding me that she was approaching a breaking point in our love affair. What can be said about this? After five years, it's a regular enough occurrence. The truth is that we've never been very happy together. We pick at each other and have squalid fights. I'll spare the details, except to say that whenever I think about our fighting, or about Carol's drinking, I feel sad for us both; and this makes me want to phone her up and find out if she's doing all right; and *this* behavior, as will easily be understood by anyone who has lasted even a short while in a hostile erotic relationship, is almost invariably a prelude to knockout sex.

"What will *I* be wearing?" called a boy from the back of the basement. The boy was Sam English, a theatre regular, bearded and deep-voiced; he was my Bottom. Carol said to him and to the entire cast, "Costumes are designed to suggest historical period and class, while also referring to modern dress. Bottom and his fellow-Mechanicals will wear weight-lifting belts over wool tunics with the characters' names ironed on."

It had been my idea to depict Shakespeare's vulgar tradesmen as a team of "Elizabethan" power lifters. I imagined them carrying six-packs of beer hanging from those clear plastic rings. "Let me see Bottom and his men at the front of the room, *pronto*," I called out, to begin that day's walk-through of the play within the play, Act V's irresistible "tedious brief scene of young Pyramus and his love Thisbe."

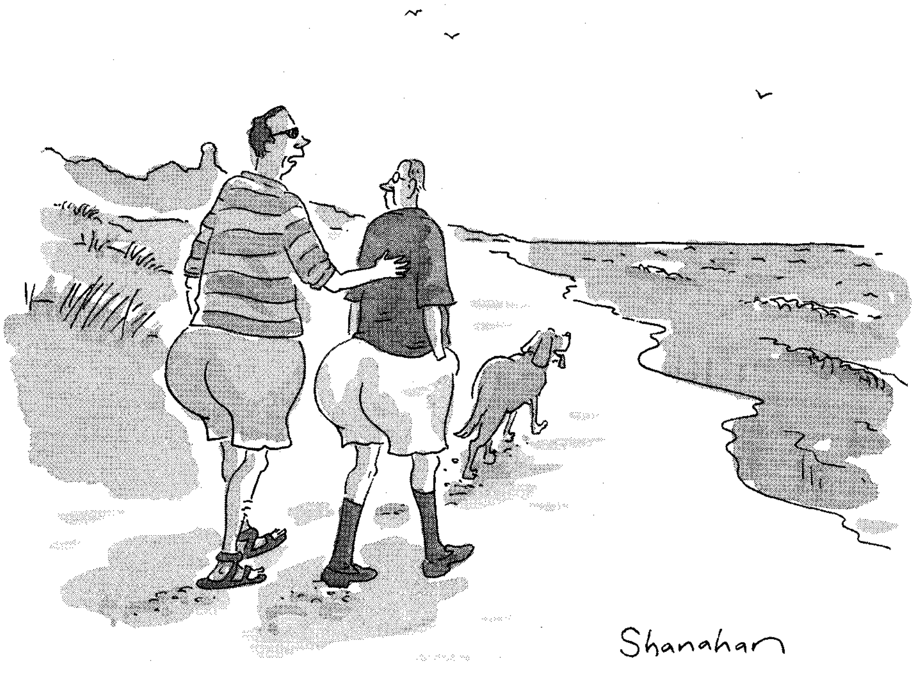
Here came Quince, the carpenter; Bottom, the weaver; Flute, the bellows-mender; Snout, the tinker; Snug, the joiner; and Starveling, the tailor—in reality a cluster of political-science and religious-studies majors. These six huddled around me, and I said, "You guys are fuck-ups and you're ugly. You're a bunch of functionally illiterate dipsomaniacs, and I'd be amazed if any of you has ever gotten laid. Your own mothers ought to be ashamed of you."

The boys looked confused, and I knew I had them where I wanted them. It is useful, when directing, to blur the boundaries between actor and role, to inaugurate, with a few stringent words, if necessary, a certain emotional instability; in this instance I was exploiting my students' routine insecurities in order to lead them to identify with Shakespeare's motley artisans.

I then gave these Merry Men my cautionary talk about the hardships of a life in the theatre. At some point, I became aware of Danielle—I could see her over Sam English's big head; she was waving and pointing at her watch, making those gestures and absurd faces people make when they need your attention, yet are afraid of you—so I concluded, "Boys, the point is this. People think the theatre is romantic and magical. And sometimes it is. But most of the time it's just a pile of crap that nobody cares about."

"Time for animal improvisations!" Danielle shouted.

"A Midsummer Night's Dream," historians tell us, was probably first presented at a royal wedding held in summer at a house outside London. Presumably, the guests, like wedding guests throughout history, became intoxicated with alcohol and the aphrodisiacal spirit of the occasion. Young couples, wander-



"Thanks for almost everything, Dad."

ing in and out of doors, slipping away to flirt or break up or make love, had dramatic counterparts in the unhappy children lost in love in Shakespeare's imaginary grove. How many real lovers woke after the ceremony, hungover and sick, to discover themselves entwined on the lawn with mates met only during the festivities the night before? I wanted to create a world where love is mercurial, unbridled, bestial. In our production of "A Midsummer Night's Dream," the unmarried lovers would fall asleep after chasing one another through the forest; then, doused with nectar from Puck's flower, they would roll over, rub their eyes, and fuck the wrong person.

"Let's all get down on our hands and knees," I told the cast.

Down we went. Right away I noticed that Mary Victoria Frost and several faeries appeared to be acting like house cats; these girls arched their backs, projected feline butts into the air, and hissed. Sheila Tannenbaum—who, in Act II, Scene 1, repeats the famous line "Use me but as your spaniel, spurn me, strike me"—was doing a nice job as a submissive pup, rolling over and sticking out her tongue to lick Billy Valentine slithering past on his belly. Lion roared and Bottom brayed like an ass, and Sarah Goldwasser, our Titania, responded by rubbing herself against Sam; it was clear that these two had a flirtation in the works. That's something I like to see. Sex makes any show better. "Oink, oink," I said to Mary Victoria Frost.

I love the theatre. I really do. And I adored my cast. They adored one another, too; these boys and girls were becoming—as the days became weeks and the play took its shape—uninhibitedly smitten with one another. It was mid-May, and summer's first warmth was in the air. The basement felt stuffy and hot, thanks to the overheating furnace in the corner.

"We're not out of the woods yet," I announced at the beginning of our third week. "Those of you who haven't gotten off book, you're holding the rest of us up. Demetrius, time your entrances so you don't keep Helena waiting downstage. Titania, less kissing and more teasing when you're giving it up to Bottom in Act IV. Make him work for it."

"Reg?" peeped a voice from the crowd. It was Sarah Goldwasser, the prima donna.

"Yes, Sarah?"

"When will we get out of this gross basement and start rehearsing on the green?"

"Any day now. Roger and Emil are building the platforms in the trees, and they have to dig the hole for Puck. Once Puck's crater is finished, we'll move the show outdoors."

"Crater?" This from Martin Epps.

"That's right. In our 'Midsummer Night's Dream,' the demons won't merely buzz around like woodland pixies; they'll come right up from the earth to grab us and pull us down to Hell. At any rate, Martin, I don't think your hole will be much of a problem after one or two on-site rehearsals. You'll see," I assured the blind boy.

It was one of those moments when a person (myself, in this instance) says something wholly untoward, and then, becoming aware of the faux pas and its implications, rushes blindly forward—there is no other way to describe this adequately, except as a kind of verbal blindness—exclaiming additional horrors. "What I mean is . . . the rest of us will . . . watch you crawling . . . covered with dirt and sticks . . . You can picture it . . . I don't mean literally. . . ."

"That's O.K., Mr. Barry," said Martin Epps.

"Call me Reg," I reminded him, by way of apology. Then, addressing the room at large, attempting to regain authority: "All right. Let me have all the young lovers over in the corner. Lovers, don't touch the boiler."

Possibly—I should say probably—it was risky of me to attempt simulated sex with undergraduates.

"What do you think, gang? Is this something you feel you can comfortably do in front of an audience?"

Together we sat—Mary Victoria Frost, Sheila Tannenbaum, Billy Valentine, and I—in a cozy circle on the floor. Billy, I noticed, had his eye on Mary; he leaned back beside her, and you could tell he was angling to spy an opening in her blouse and glimpse a breast. Mary spoke. "How dark will it be?"

"Fairly. By Act III, the sun will be setting. With any luck, it'll be a humid night and the fireflies will be out."

"It's going to be beautiful!" exclaimed Sheila.

I concurred, "That's right, Sheila. When you make love, you're doing God's work on Earth."

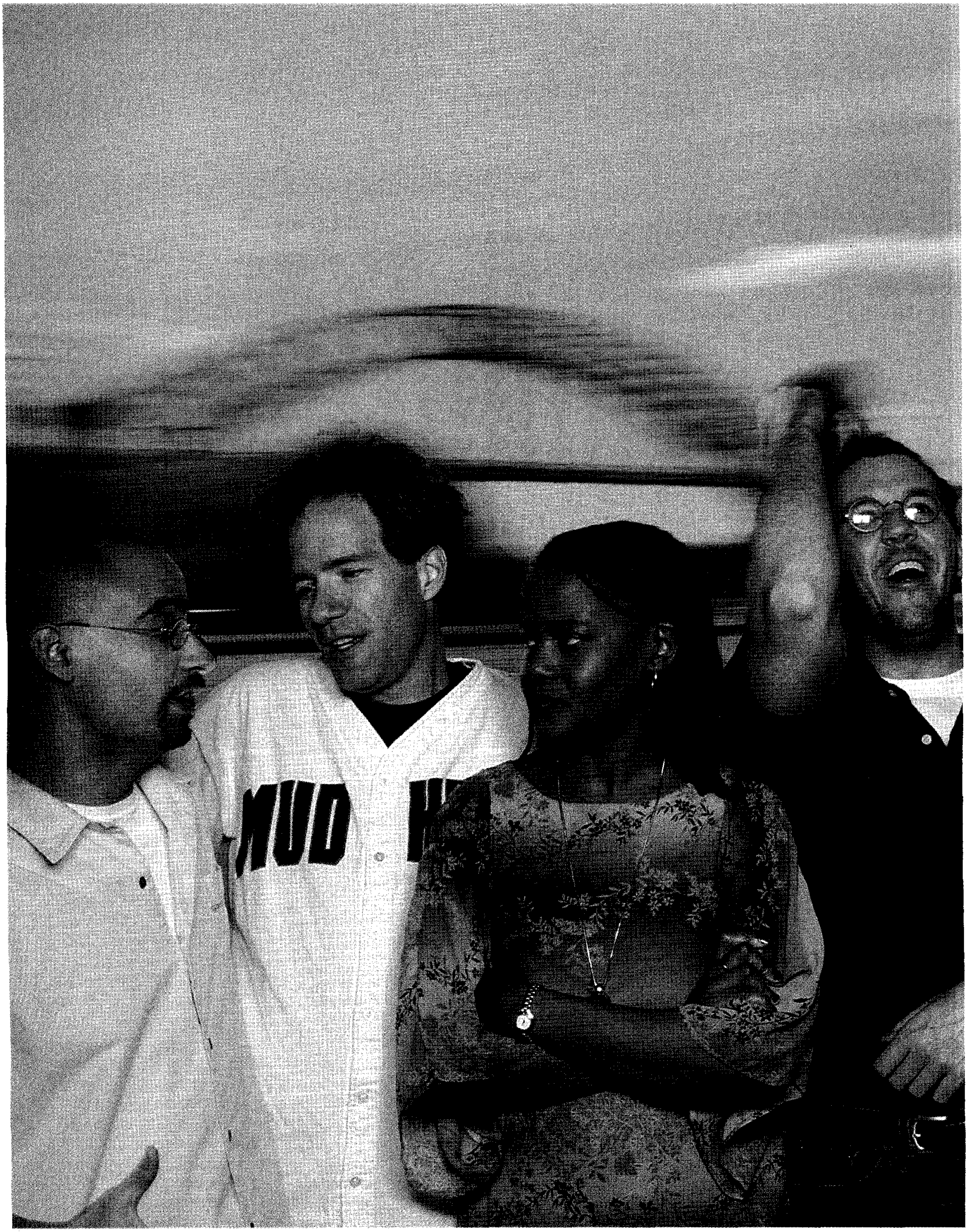
After that, we sat for a time. The atmosphere became pleasantly uncomfortable. This sensation of a pervasive, shared emotional discomfort may have been helped along by the presence nearby of the foul-smelling oil furnace, hissing and burning, making the air in our little corner feel sickeningly, suffocatingly warm. Finally Billy broke the tension with a homophobic joke. "Reg, will I have to make out with you?"

"In a manner of speaking, Billy. Lysander, Hermia, Demetrius, and Helena will trade back and forth in a kind of blind, revolving embrace. Erotic possibility, signifying not immorality but immortality, is the real pleasure for unmarried lovers. So we're going to get it on."

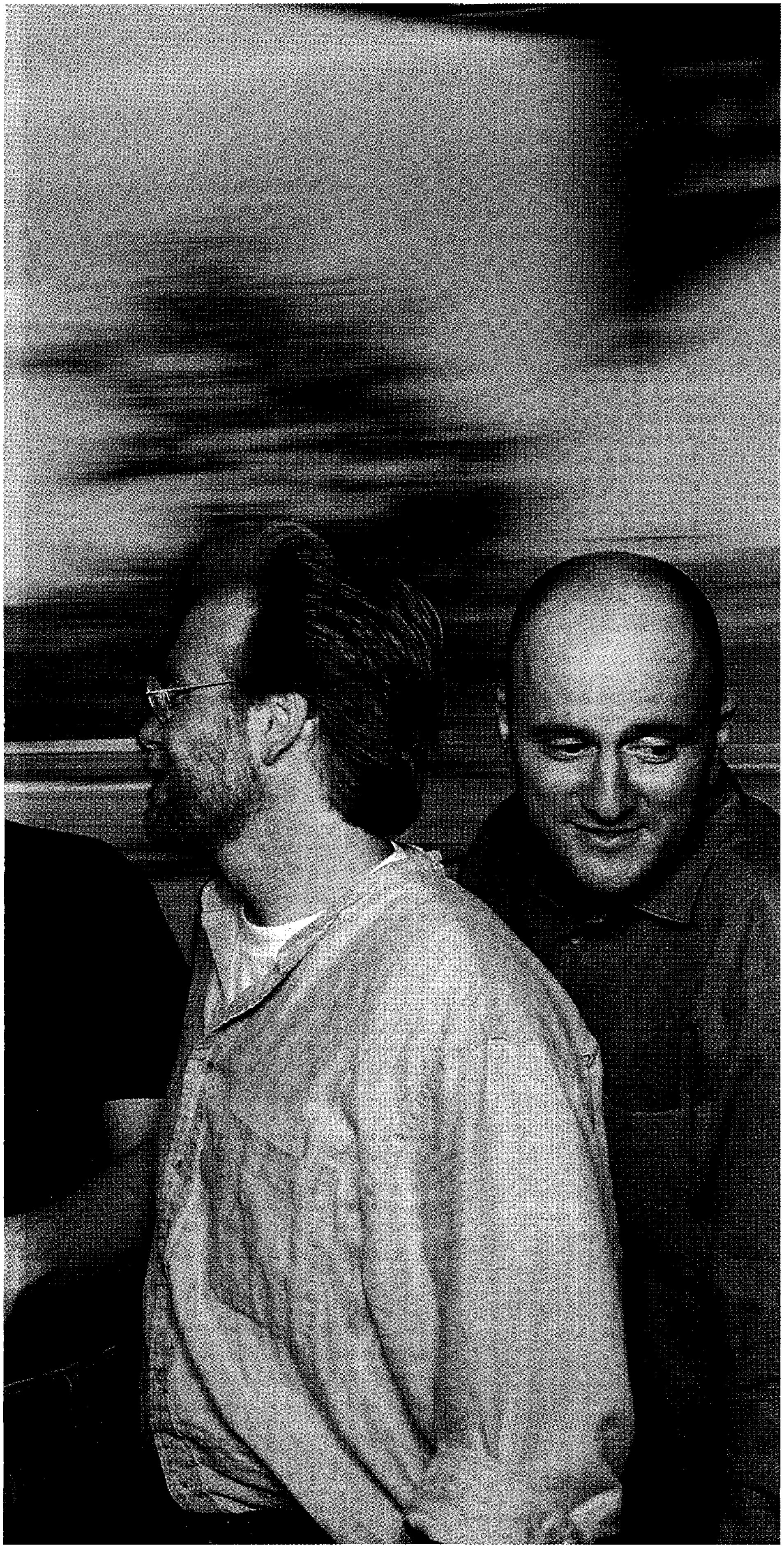
"Like in my dormitory," laughed Valentine.

Later, we all stretched out on the floor and began mapping positions. It was clear that the kids were—how shall I put this?—experienced in some ways and inexperienced in others. Sheila Tannenbaum chuckled when touched; there was little that was pretty about this rangy girl, yet she was coy and therefore sexy. Billy Valentine was not sexy. It annoyed me to watch him grope Mary Victoria Frost. He had no moves, and she, as far as I could tell, didn't care. I signalled everyone to switch partners, and Mary wrapped her legs around me. I read this as permission to cradle her in my lap. She weighed practically nothing. Was she one of those girls who exist on breakfast cereal and amphetamines? I stuck my face in her hair and breathed her smells of bath oil and nicotine. Oh, my heart. I laid my head on Mary's shoulder and watched young Billy Valentine straddle Sheila. He appeared to be mauling the girl's throat—what was he doing, administering a "sleeper" hold?—until Sheila made an athletic move with her legs, scissoring Billy and bringing him hard to the floor. *Thump.* Quickly, I leaned over and tugged Sheila toward me, in this way getting two girls and scoring a sexual victory over a boy young enough to be my son.

Billy Valentine sat to the side with his legs crossed and his head down. I had the feeling, watching him, that I was seeing him in an unguarded moment, and in a posture and attitude that ex-



Left to right: Junot Díaz, Rick Moody, Edwidge Danticat, David Foster Wallace, George Saunders, and Jeffrey Eugenides.



Photograph by Chris Callis.

pressed an essential state of his being. I was witnessing, it occurred to me, something like pure sadness; and I would've bet money that Billy was the child of divorced, probably alcoholic parents. I cuddled the girls and, in a moment of, I suppose, empathy, told him, "You know, Billy, my mother and father got drunk and argued all the time. The truth is, they were terrible to each other. I thought I'd never get over all that, and I guess maybe I never have."

For an instant, Billy looked as if he might laugh. But he didn't laugh. He gazed at me with these big, round eyes that seemed to grow larger and more rounded; and his whole countenance changed, which is to say that, in some way that had more to do with a feeling than an actual look, his expression softened, and he lowered his head.

"Places for Act II, Scene 1!" I called out to Danielle and the cast. "We're going to run the play from Puck's line to the faerie, 'Thou speak'st aright; I am that merry wanderer of the night.' Puck, you're downstage left, crawling out of your hole."

"Thou speak'st aright. I am that merry. Wanderer of the night," intoned my sightless Puck.

"Wait a minute, Martin. Do the line again, this time as if you hate life. Say this line as if you're alone in the world and you despise yourself."

"Thou speak'st aright; I am that"—here he paused for an especially long time, as if thinking about a hard problem—"merry wanderer of the night."

"Listen to me. Puck is not some frolicking clown. He's Hobgoblin! Beelzebub! Lucifer! Satan, the enemy of love! Puck is a wretched, willfully destructive creature. Let's do a quick exercise. Repeat after me: I am a wretched, willfully destructive creature."

"I am a wretched, willfully destructive. Creature."

"Everything I do creates pain."

"Everything I. Do creates pain."

"No one loves me."

"No. One loves me."

"I'm fucked up."

"I'm fucked . . . "

He was sniffling. His voice cracked. Were there tears? I could not see the young actor's eyes because they were hidden behind dark lenses. I leaned close to my Puck, in order to growl in his ear, "I wear the number of the beast."

"Huh?" he whimpered.

I smacked the blind kid on the shoulder. "Let's run this play, Martin, I mean Puck. When we get to the section where you chase the young lovers through the forest, go ahead and swat our legs with your cane."

And to the cast, the Royals and rude Mechanicals, the devils and imps and lost children, I proclaimed, "This show needs to *move*, people. It's a comedy!"

Or is it? Students of "A Midsummer Night's Dream" will undoubtedly be familiar with the trend, in recent years, to emphasize horror in the drama: faeries played as ghouls, Oberon as a molester; Bottom's transformation depicted as a grotesque, literally asinine mutilation. There is a reactionary aspect to this movement away from traditional fun and games; construing the "Dream" as a hellish sexual nightmare rather than as an innocuous garden party is a way of making the play interestingly "modern" in the post-World War, post-Holocaust, thermonuclear, and psychoanalytic era.

"Make it ugly," I instructed my cast in the final week before the show. It was a Sunday afternoon, our first—and only, thanks to storms blowing in—outdoor run-through. The day was overcast and unseasonably chilly, with winds from the north smelling like rain. Crows perched on tree branches and the faeries' wooden platforms—three plywood decks connected by swaying footbridges, everything balanced precariously in the high, heavy oak limbs that reached out to shade Puck's deep hole, dug "center stage" at the southernmost edge of the Barry College green, our theatre.

"Up in the trees, faeries, let's go," I called. Girls took turns climbing. A few had trouble getting up. Sarah Goldwasser, the regal Titania, marched over and said, "Reg, will you tell Oberon to stop grabbing my nipples in our fight scene?"

"Hmm. I think it's kind of good for the scene, Sarah."

"He does it too hard. My nipples don't like it that hard," she said, and huffed off toward her bower.

"Here comes the rain," a boy's voice beside me exclaimed.

"I'd appreciate it if you would concentrate on your acting and not worry about the weather, Billy."

"How are we supposed to do any acting when the entire stage is nothing but a hole in the ground?"

The boy had a point. And I had an answer. "The circular patterns sketched by our movements around the pit will illustrate mankind's proximity to the abyss, and this in turn will be a dramaturgical reminder of the themes of revolution and renewal in English morris dancing, which, you'll recall from the first week of rehearsal, Billy, is an acknowledged folk source for Shakespeare's May Day comedies."

I wish I could say I was pleased with this impromptu oration. Purely technical observations concerning the larger implications of stagecraft are best left in the classroom, having, out here in the field, as it were, more of a confusing than a clarifying effect. Billy looked despairing. Clearly I had been right, during that sex-scene rehearsal the week before, in supposing him to be the child of an unhappy home. I put my hand on his shoulder, and said, in as fatherly a voice as I could concoct on short notice, "I know it's a mighty big hole, Billy. We'll all have to be careful not to fall in and break our legs. Sometimes in the theatre, as in life, we do our best work when mainly concerned with not making fools of ourselves."

"That's typical for a man to say, isn't it?" declared a woman's voice. I became immediately tense. The speaker was Carol, who had sneaked up from behind and was standing with her arms crossed before her chest, the posture expressing her confrontational mode, surely an indication that she had been drinking.

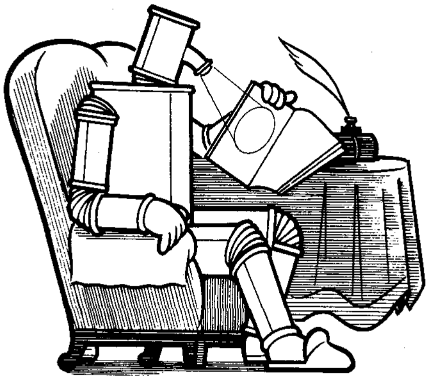
"Hello, Carol."

"Don't bother being polite, Reg," Carol said. "It doesn't look good on you." She was weaving slightly, actually swaying in place, much in the manner of an actor impersonating a drunk, I thought. Here was an example of a dramatic cliché's analogue in reality.

"We're about to begin rehearsal, Carol. I suppose you've come to take a few last-minute costume measurements?"

"Fuck you."

"Let's not have one of our scenes, Carol, not out here in front of the boy, please?"



"Look who's talking. If it isn't the protector of youth himself." She addressed Billy, "I'll bet you're fond of your teacher, aren't you?"

"I guess."

"You *guess*?" She seemed very unsteady on her feet. Her voice sounded hysterical and mean. "It's going to rain! Have you ever fucked in the rain? Your teacher likes to fuck in the rain!"

"Jesus, Carol."

"He likes to fuck in the rain and he likes it on top of his desk and in cars and on buses!"

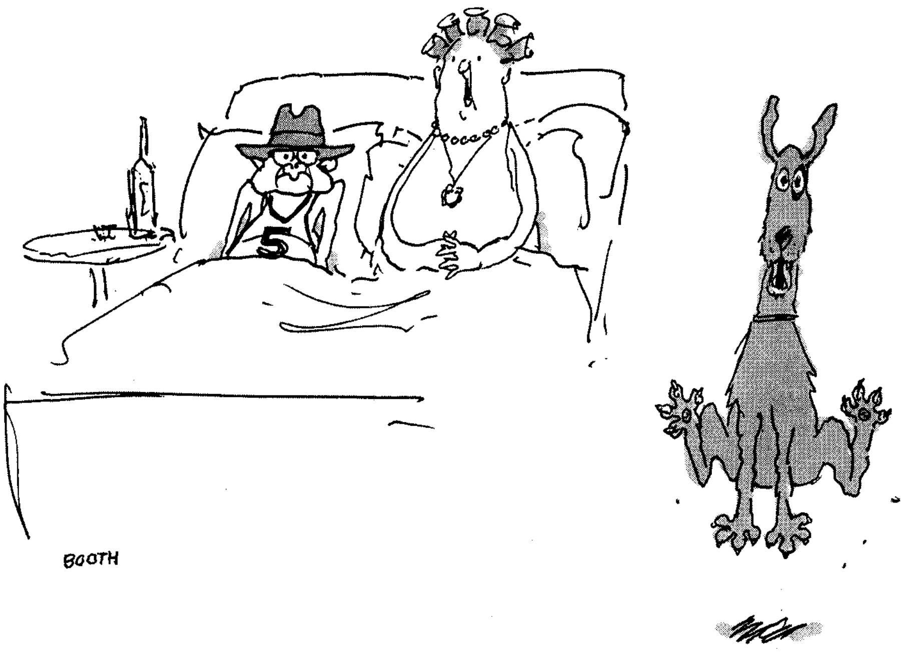
By now people had accumulated, a circle of actors and actresses, a few passersby, no faculty or fellow academic deans, I hoped, everyone gathered to relish the spectacle of Carol crying, "I was going to have a baby! This man wouldn't let me have our baby!"

Billy, I noticed, wore a surprisingly composed (though somewhat glassed-over) expression, as if he were accustomed to violent exhibitionism in adults. He looked as though nothing could be more natural to him than a drunken woman's fury.

"I'm sorry, son," I said to the boy when Carol eventually ceased yelling. I had the uneasy feeling that I was in some way giving an expert rendering of Billy's real father, a man who must've been lacking—if our episode on the college lawn could be used as an indicator—backbone.

"It's cool," sighed Billy.

Then the rain came. The first drops were followed by wind and a great, rolling thunderclap. Tree branches swayed, and faeries scampered down from their platforms; then forked lightning struck nearby and the sky was instantly, ghostly white. Cast and crew began racing off in different directions. It was one of those thoroughly drenching gales that mark the beginning of summer—there was no point trying to stay dry. I reached out and took Carol by the arm, to comfort her and steady her. Rainwater soaked her hair and matted it in clumps. "Let's go indoors and get you wrapped in a warm towel," I shouted over the thunder; and she tugged her arm away and staggered to the edge of Puck's hole. She gave me one of her powerful, inimitable, disgusted looks, then leaned over, braced herself with her hands on her knees,



“Mr. Goodrich, it’s time we called each other by our first names.”

• •

and vomited into the pit. It happened quickly and was over before Billy or I could respond in a helpful way. A couple of heaves and Carol spat out the last. She looked terrible, like a witch in the Scottish play, I thought, or one of those modern descendants of crones on heaths, the living dead who climb from graves in horror movies. She was intensely drunk, of course. To Billy—she was looking mostly at the boy, though presumably Carol was thinking of me, or maybe neither Billy nor me—she said, “Look at you. You make me sick. You’re like your father. He does whatever he wants with people. He’s a shit. There’s no love in this family.”

Then she reeled away across the green. Billy and I watched Carol lurch around a corner and disappear behind Lunbeck Hall; then we turned, flustered and embarrassed, two men sharing a burden of humiliation, and walked together in the opposite direction. Rain was in our faces and our hands were buried in our pockets. Wind and water forced our eyes downward. Our shoes squished. Puddles were everywhere.

It was Billy who spoke first. “I doubt if I could run like that if I’d just barfed.”

This comment made me like young Valentine immensely. I told him, “You should have played Puck.”

This was said not so much to avoid the subject of Carol, her outburst and her vomiting, as to assuage feelings of guilt and shame by making an offering of some kind, however small and meaningless. Billy replied, in the right spirit, “Demetrius rocks.”

“I’m glad you feel that way, Billy. Do you have any more of that good, strong dope?” I asked, dripping.

“No, sir. Not on me.”

“That’s too bad.” For reasons I could not name, I went on, “When I was younger, I figured I’d grow up and get married and have children. But now years have gone by, and I’m not young.”

“That’s cool,” said Billy. And he said, “Anyway, you shouldn’t marry someone with a drinking problem.”

“You’re right about that.”

“Mr. Barry?”

“Reg.”

“Reg, do you think she knows about my father?”

Knows what? “She wasn’t talking about your father. She thought I was your father, and you were our son that we never had, and you were growing up to be like me.”

“That’s crazy.”

“Yes,” I agreed. But it was true that I’d had the same notion as Carol. “See you tomorrow, Billy.”

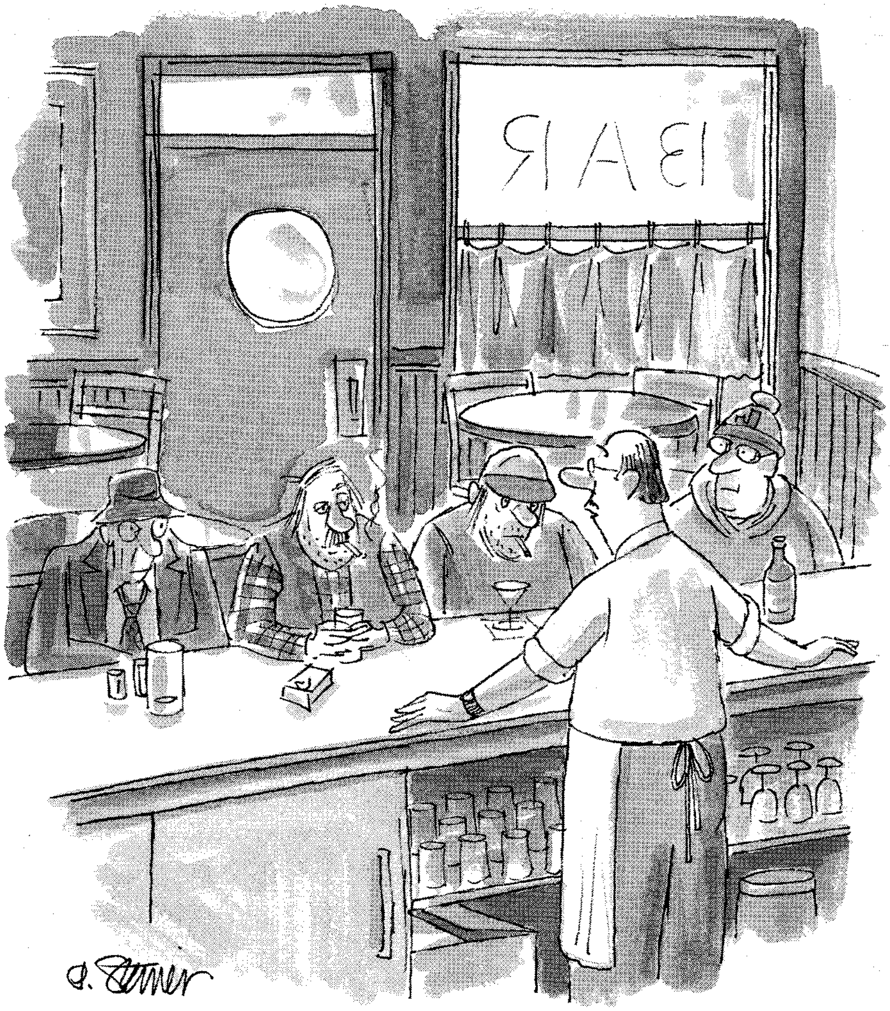
“Later, Reg.”

Rehearsal, however, was not to be. Not the next day, or the day after that, or the afternoon following. The storm worsened over the course of the first night, causing trees to fall on power lines, disabling phones and cutting off electricity to homes and college buildings. Classes were cancelled. By morning of the second day, Tuesday, the thunder and lightning had stopped, though the sky remained gray, pouring heavy rain. The country around here is veined with creeks; these grew into deep, fast-moving rivers. The college, safe on high ground, operated minimally on generators. A party spirit prevailed. New couples would subsequently date their union to the week of the flash flood. The disaster occurred on Thursday, when natural dams in the nearby hills gave way, releasing torrents of water derived primarily from melted winter snow. The water crashed down into the valleys, washing away roads, trees, cars, and about twenty people. The National Guard and the International Red Cross landed helicopters on the Wm. T. Barry Gymnasium parking lot. Student volunteers collected cast-off clothing, canned food, blankets, etc. A short time later, it was learned that Harrison P. Mackay, a chemistry professor with forty years at the college, had been a flood casualty. The professor, not well known to me except as a red-faced personage wearing a bow tie, was found lodged in an embankment near the town of Chesterford. An emergency meeting of deans and the president convened; sadness was expressed and a few important memories were recalled. After the meeting, President Farnham took me aside and said, “Reginald, I want you to do that play if the weather clears. Right after our service for Harrison. We’re all going to need cheering up.”

It was in this way that we came to perform “A Midsummer Night’s Dream” on a wet field before an audience of mourners wearing black.

“We’re going to have a tough house,” I said to my young company on the evening of the show.

Folding chairs were set up on the mushy ground. Organ music, a gloomy Episcopalian dirge, drifted in from the church at the college green’s distant end. Harrison’s memorial, under way. Skies remained partly cloudy, and a light breeze blew from the south. Together we stood, cast and crew, in a circle around Puck’s hole. We weren’t holding hands, though we should have been—there was a noticeable feeling, in the group, of apprehension, a communal dread and excitation only partly attributable to normal stagefright. The hole, in the wake of the



"What would you boys think if we started selling books?"

week's rains, was a muddy pond. A duck, possibly blown far from home in the high winds a few days earlier, paddled on the surface. Fallen leaves looked like twisted miniature lily pads. These elements—water, duck, vegetation—combined to create a disturbingly powerful scene, a vastly reduced water vista that stood in relation to actual lakes as an artist's easel studies do to fully realized, complex paintings. It was, in other words, an excellent stage-set pond, not at all unlike a classical folly from an English garden—scaled down, deceptively simple, unreal enough to seem mysterious, primordial, sad.

The funeral music was not helping my mood. Jim Ferguson, our sexually aggressive Oberon and a zoology major, pointed out, "That's a female mallard. She's injured. Look at her—she's all crooked."

It was true. The duck listed in the water. Jim explained, "Ducks are vicious when they're hurt. They host human influenza and other dangerous viruses."

"Duck?" asked Martin Epps, waving his cane, straying precariously near the water's edge.

I told him, "Don't worry about the duck, O.K.?" To the cast in general, I said, "I'll need a couple of volunteers to lower Martin into the water when the time comes."

"Water?" said Martin, splashing with his cane, poking to find the hole's bottom.

The duck paddled weakly. All around me, kids in little groups stared down at it and smoked in that self-consciously erotic way—the dramatic puffs and the stagy, side-of-the-mouth exhalations blown upward into the air like steam escaping so many hot engines—that seems to be an advertisement for the carefree life. I couldn't take it. "Do you kids think you're going to live forever?" I shouted at these innocents. "Do you think life is some kind of *holiday*? You think that one day you'll stop being depressed! You won't *ever* stop being depressed! No matter how much *sex* you have!"

As if on cue, bells rang out from the chapel spire. Big wooden doors were flung open, and the first few mourners emerged from the church.

"Places!" cried Danielle.

Faeries tossed away cigarette butts and Royals crouched behind bushes while Mechanicals popped open their first-act beers. Billy Valentine passed Mary Victoria Frost an enormous joint. Martin Epps alone remained before his watery lair. "Billy, Mary, give me a hand with Martin," I said. "One, two, three." Up went the blind boy. He was light for a fat kid. He entered the water and said, "Ahhh."

"Stay put and don't piss off the duck," I directed him.

Billy and Mary and I crawled beneath the stage-left shrubs. Billy was about to stash the joint when I stopped him. "Hey, don't put that away. I need a hit." Fireflies blinked on, off, on. The audience settled into seats. Sounds of weeping rose from the house. I peeked up and could see, above me, faeries' legs dangling from platforms in trees, pair after pair of young legs.

"Good dope," I whispered to Billy.

Then Danielle gave the signal, and Greg Lippincott walked onstage and exclaimed, "Now, fair Hippolyta, our nuptial hour draws on apace; four happy days bring in another moon." Who can listen to that kind of stuff? A moment later came the cue for the young lovers to stumble out and stand before their elders. There was not much ground to stand on, only slippery grass beside the hole, where Martin was sunk in black water to his chin. The crooked duck regarded Martin with crazed eyes. "Full of vexation come I, with complaint against my child, my daughter Hermia," growled Egeus as faculty, alumni, and a few undergraduates and parents wept tears for Harrison Mackay. Understandably, I felt the need to get a laugh. "The course of true love never did run smooth," I proclaimed morosely, and at that instant the duck began flapping its maimed wings, and Martin waved his cane wildly, and a gust of wind blew in like a sneeze from God, shaking the trees and blowing hats off heads in the audience. I looked for Carol among the mourners. Where was she? Did she truly love me enough to have a child with me?

"It's going pretty well, don't you think?" I asked Billy when we came offstage at the middle of Act I. We listened respectfully as Helena rattled off her famous speech about being sexually unattractive; and then Bottom and his men took over, rushing out and tackling one another and flubbing their lines—but it didn't matter what they did, because these characters are probably the most indestructible comic team in all of English literature, and, sure enough, when Bottom crunched Lion in the windpipe with his weight belt the audience let out its first decent belly laugh of the night. Billy and I hid behind the backstage trees and waited to run out, lie down to sleep on the cold ground, get drugged by Puck, wake up with our hard-ons, and begin chasing each other and/or Mary Victoria Frost and/or Sheila Tannenbaum through the haunted woods. Billy whispered, "Can I talk to you, Reg?"

"Call me Lysander during the show."

"I didn't want you to think, after the other day, you know, that I don't love my father."

He seemed maudlin, not at all like a happy comedian eager to chew the scenery. "I didn't *think* that. I'm sure you love your father very much," I assured him.

Saying this made me sad. Billy told me, "My father is not a bad man, no matter what people say."

Night was falling; the air had grown cold. Puck on his stomach crawled up the bank of his pond, then splashed back down into the water. Faeries on platforms jumped up and down noisily. Mary and Sheila, one tree over from me and Billy, adjusted costumes and one another's hair. Up Puck came again, covered in mud. His glasses had slipped from his head, and now his sightless eyes stared wildly; he could not have realized how afraid he looked. "I'll put a girdle. Round about. *Earth*—" he sputtered as, suddenly, the duck attacked. Martin howled and grasped at the mud and the grass, reaching for a handhold on dry land. It was too late. The duck blasted off the pond and came down hard in a spray of foam on Martin's pudgy, naked back. Webbed feet slapped the boy's white skin as the duck gave the coup de grâce with a thrust of her bill into Martin's neck.

"Thanks for talking, Lysander," Billy exclaimed. He bolted from behind our oak tree. Sheila Tannenbaum leaped out of hiding and ran after him. "I love thee not, therefore pursue me not," the boy yelled at the girl.

What is more exciting than kinetic, technical theatre, the impeccable orchestrations of pratfall farce? I say this in consideration of the fact that audience members were leaving their seats and sneaking close, the better to gawk at Puck in his hole. As is always the case during productions of the Bard, a few carried paperback copies of the script. Sticklers. I watched them thumb pages back and forth, no doubt searching for references to a vengeful mallard. I have no objection to the public encroaching on the players—during Shakespeare's time, spectators sat on the stage and became, to a limited degree, implicated in the theatre experience—but in this instance a participatory audience was a safety hazard. Billy, Mary, Sheila, and I had to dodge and weave throughout the better part of Acts II and III. Darting barefoot and more or less naked around people wearing formal clothes had, as an activity, a distinctly anarchic, rebellious aspect—rebellious in the sense that it created, for me at least, the kind of sweaty excitement that comes with dangerous play. I felt free and young. I should say that I felt myself backsliding to a younger state of mind. It's hard to say what this feeling consisted in—panic and hope, disappointment, shame. I was wearing torn Barry Bears gym shorts and feeling like a teen-ager and running fast, and my feet sank into the earth, and mud splashed my legs. What is more awful and disorienting than adolescence? How had I become so lost and alone? What had persuaded me that I could play a young man's part? Was Billy pursuing me? Was I pursuing Billy? The bereaved came forward into the fray with heads bowed, and I stumbled through a puddle and narrowly missed crashing into President Farnham. "Reginald! This is criminal! Criminal!" the man shouted after me. Then: "Up and down, up and down, I will lead them up and down; I am fear'd in field and town: Goblin, lead them up and down," Martin Epps sang out magnificently, beautifully, before, at long last, he slid through ooze and disappeared, cane and all, beneath the water.

Bubbles, then silence.

Women and men wearing black lined the banks of the wine-black lake. They appeared, I thought, to be enjoying the show. It must be said that Shakespeare's genius lies partly in his plays' ready adaptability to the kinds of high-handed, decadent concepts guaranteed to astonish playgoers and offend the critics. Theatre artistes often speak of their disregard for the audience; and it's a badge of integrity among some in this business to ignore the ostensible needs and desires of that inexpert class the ticket holders. But I think this is a rotten attitude. I'm in favor of putting on a show people will remember and talk about.

Who cared if it was too dark out to really see anything? Who noticed that Mary Victoria Frost was whacked on pot and dropping her best lines? What did it matter if Mustardseed and Moth had stripped off their G-strings in order to sixty-nine atop the tree-house stage set? Puck had sunk, and the important middle acts were nearing conclusion, and this meant it was time for me to cuddle on the grass with Sheila Tannenbaum.

There she was. She looked darling in her black-and-orange cheerleader's outfit and her mesh tights. She was my Helena, and she came toward me, smiling her awkward smile; and we settled on the wet ground and held one another in the night.

It was time for sleep. Sheila, the Lady Bears basketball star, snuggled warmly in my arms. She made a surprisingly good fit. She rested her head on my shoulder, and we kissed, lightly, and I looked up at trees and saw naked children.

How nice to lie in the grass. Other players, the demons and mere mortals, coupled nearby. It was a world of youthfulness and love. It was our summer at last. Faeries in the old oaks cradled Bottom and their mistress, and you could hear Sam English braying in ecstasy.

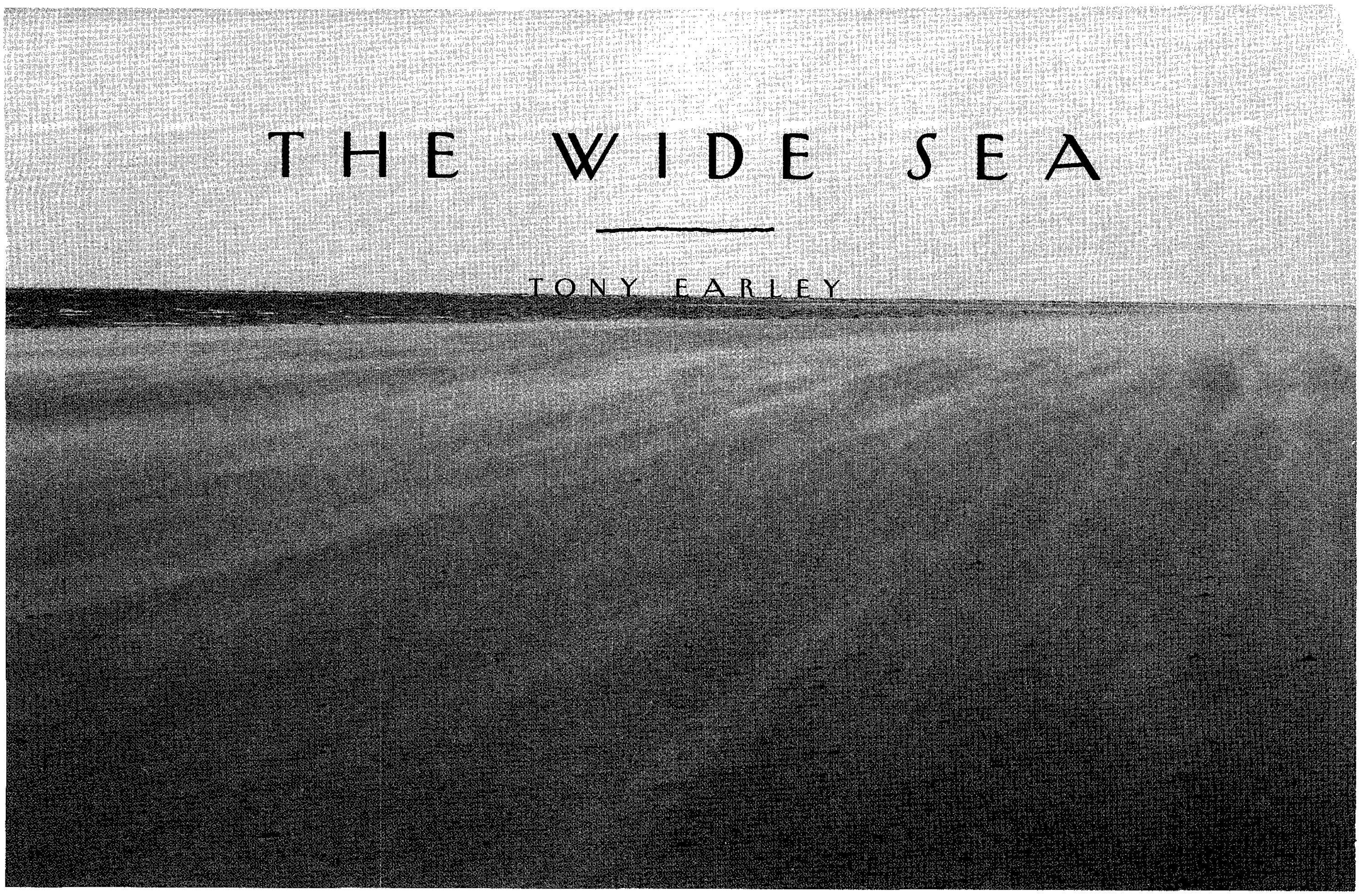
Beneath a tree, sprawled face down on the ground, lay Mary Frost, my poor Hermia. She looked so pale, so stuporous.

There would be plenty of time, later in Act IV or V or whatever act this was, to wake up, dump Helena, and marry, for a fitting consummation, the right girl.

It was the deep of night, late even for the fireflies. A few appeared here and there. Soon they would be gone. In the meantime, the Lord of Athens lit a cigarette and waited in the wings. ♦

THE WIDE SEA

TONY EARLEY



STUART KLIPPER, "NORTH CAROLINA COAST" (1992)

JIM and Uncle Al did not set out on their journey until after supper, when the heat of the day had broken at last, when the evening air would make travelling seem more adventure than hardship. Jim did not know where they were going, only that it was far from Aliceville, where he lived with his mother and her three brothers. Mama had packed them a dozen ham biscuits in waxed paper and filled a gallon jar with water. A paper bag behind the truck seat contained a pair of underwear, a pair of socks, and a clean shirt for Jim. Uncle Al had filled two vacuum bottles with black coffee, and in his pocket he carried Uncle Coran's pistol. The pistol was verification of the journey's high seriousness: it usually nested in the cash drawer at the uncles' store, and appeared, like a rare and dangerous bird, only when one of them needed to shoot a snake.

All Uncle Al would say was that they were going to see a man about a dog. Jim knew from experience that that wasn't their true destination—there *never* was a dog—but he did not mind the mystery. He had never travelled more than thirty miles away from home in any direction; he thought he would be happy to see the sights wherever their travels landed them.

THEY passed through Shelby an hour after leaving home. For Jim, it was the point east beyond which lay undiscovered country. He had visited the town twice before, and again found it splendid in every way. Shelby had wide, paved streets; big, painted houses with green lawns watched over them from beneath the shade of old trees. Downtown, Jim was surprised to see that many of the stores were still open for business, even as darkness approached. As they headed again into the red-hilled, open country, they passed a sign pointing the way to Charlotte. Uncle Zeno had taken Mama there one Saturday before she married Jim's father, in 1921. She had bought her wedding dress in a department store. She had ridden elevators. She had almost been run down by a streetcar, which clanged past with blue electricity spitting and sparking from the wires overhead. Jim had heard the story about Mama's trip to Charlotte all his life.

He leaned toward the open window so that the warm wind whistling in blew directly into his face. When he closed one eye, the black line along the edge of the state highway seemed to disappear into the truck's front fender, as if the tire were coiling it up like a rope. When he looked back, he saw the line unrolling neatly behind them, marking the way they had come. They would be able to find their way home.

Small, well-tended farms, much like the ones Jim had grown up among, sat along both sides of the highway like strangers with familiar faces. The farmhouses were unpainted and sat up off the ground on red brick pillars. At the back of each house, a dim kerosene glow lit a single window. Black strings of cooking smoke uncoiled from their chimneys and disappeared into the dusky sky. Jim knew that the people who lived inside those houses were sitting down to supper and talking about the day they had spent in the cotton fields. Jim studied the farms carefully, each one a last outpost along a moving frontier. Two thoughts came to Jim at once, joined by a thread of amazement: he thought, People live here, and he thought, They don't know who I am. By the time they reached Kings Mountain, he was asleep.

HE woke to a silence as loud as the clanging of a bell. Not until he sat up and found Uncle Al standing in the glow of the headlights, along the black

edge of the world, could he hear anything at all. Uncle Al was drinking coffee and eating a ham biscuit. Beyond him lay perfect darkness, night without trees or mountains or stars, nothing to keep the sky from settling onto the ground. It had collapsed already onto the road behind them. Jim climbed out of the truck and hurried into the light. Uncle Al fished into a pocket, pulled out a biscuit, and handed it to Jim.

"Where are we?" Jim asked.

"South Carolina," said Uncle Al. "Not much to it, huh?"

"No, sir."

The air was warm and thick, a coat you couldn't take off. The light vibrated with moths; the darkness shook with the rhythmic sawing of crickets and cicadas.

"Good dirt through here, though. Can you smell it?"

"Yes, sir."

"I always did love the smell of dirt. I can tell good dirt just by smelling it. I can smell weeds, too. Did you know I could smell weeds?"

"No, sir."

"Weeds. Boll weevils. Grasshoppers. Whatever. I can smell everything."

"Yes, sir."

"I wish I could wake up, though. That's what I wish right now." Uncle Al took off his hat and hollered out into South Carolina, "*Oh Lord, I wish I could wake up!*"

They waited, but not even an echo answered back. God was asleep. It was the middle of the night. Jim giggled. Uncle Al put his hat back on. He took another swallow of coffee and turned quickly on Jim. He said, "Do you ever wish you had a daddy?"

The words hurt Jim as if they were made of bones and meat.

"My daddy's dead," he said.

"I know, Jim," Uncle Al said. "Your daddy was a good man, and everybody wishes he was still alive. What I meant was, do you ever wish you had somebody else for a daddy?"

Nobody had ever asked Jim that before. It was not a question his mother would have allowed. He gave the idea some thought.

"No," he said finally. "I've already got three daddies."

Uncle Al stared at Jim but didn't say anything.

Jim thought he had said something wrong. "You and Uncle Zeno and Uncle Coran."

Uncle Al still did not respond. Uncle Al did not even appear to occupy the face that stared back at Jim.

Jim swallowed. "Boy," he said, "South Carolina sure has a lot of bugs."

Uncle Al laughed suddenly: a lone, sharp noise, like a bark.

"Let me tell you something, Jim," he said. "I don't care what anybody says. You're all right. Now eat your biscuit before I jerk a knot in your tail."

THE first bright sunlight of the new day found them at an abandoned country store near Florence. The small, weathered building sat hard by the highway, beneath an old oak tree with wide, spreading limbs. A single crow sat in the top of the tree, and flew away when they pulled into the lot, as if to tell someone they had come. Uncle Al drove the truck into the shade of the tree. The engine, when he turned it off, ticked hotly in the quiet morning.

The store crouched among broad, fallow fields coming up in cockleburrs and broomstraw and small cedar trees. Jim knew that the presence of cedar trees meant that the land was cotton ground that had been farmed too many years in a row. Now it was too poor to make a crop; the farmers who had tilled it were gone, and the store where the farmers had shopped was closed. The uncles never planted cotton on the same ground two years in a row, and tended to look down on farmers who did.

Uncle Al took off his hat and laid it on the seat beside him.

"I'm going to take a nap," he said. "Can you keep a good lookout until I wake up?"

"Yes, sir."

"Now, you better not let anything sneak up on you. If something gets ahold of me while I'm asleep, you're in big trouble."

Jim climbed out of the truck to where it would be easier to keep an eye on things. He left the truck door open in case he had to get back in a hurry. The oak tree he stood beneath seemed to mark the exact center of the empty fields; the blue bowl of the sky balanced directly above it, which made the place seem important, even though nothing in the landscape, save the tree itself, suggested import. A dark line of undergrowth in the distance to the east marked the passage of a creek, but nothing else called out to the eye for notice; the old store leaned slightly toward the tree, as if dependent upon it for company.

On the porch of the store, Jim found a thermometer advertising Red Rock Cola nailed like a message to the middle of the door. He studied it seriously; already it read eighty-five degrees. "It's going to be a hot one," Jim said out loud, for no reason other than to make himself brave. For all he knew, a hobo or a robber or a ghost was hiding inside the building. There was a depression on. Mama said depression made people mean. Jim tiptoed to the building's only window, sucked his lungs full of courage, and peered through the glass. Inside was a counter made of rough lumber, and a few rickety-looking shelves, but nothing else. So far, he thought, so good.

Behind the store Jim found the bleached skull of a small animal; he could find no evidence of what had killed it, and decided the culprit must have been a snake. He put the skull on the end of a stick and poked through the weeds around the store, but the snake evaded his searching. Twice he heard cars approaching on the highway, and both times he ran and hid behind the front of the truck, ready to wake Uncle Al, but both times the cars passed without slowing. Jim watched until they disappeared from view, just to make sure the drivers weren't trying to trick him.

IN Florence, Uncle Al asked directions to the plantation of Mr. Harvey Hartsell. Mr. Hartsell had a team of matched Belgian draft horses for sale. Uncle Al had seen an ad for the horses in a farming paper. The uncles farmed with mules—they had always farmed with mules—but lately Uncle Al had begun to desire a good team of horses. He said he got tired of talking to mules all day long. Mules, said Uncle Al, weren't always truthful. Horses weren't as smart, but at least you could believe what they said.

Mr. Harvey Hartsell's place wasn't hard to find. He lived at the end of a long dirt road whose only purpose seemed to be leading travellers to his plantation. The house was red brick, with tall white pillars and porches upstairs and down. It sat at the end of a long white driveway of crushed seashells. The drive was shaded by pecan trees, whose long limbs met above it; the trees formed a cool green tunnel through which Uncle Al drove. Jim felt suddenly ashamed of his overalls, and of the sweat ring around the crown of Uncle Al's straw hat, and of the ham biscuits they had just eaten. Mr. Harvey Hartsell's plantation did not seem to be a place where they belonged. Uncle Al knocked at the tall double doors of the house for a long time. Jim was glad when no one answered.

Back at the main road, Uncle Al turned the truck toward a collection of cabins and farm buildings in the distance. The cabins they passed on the way to the main barn seemed locked up tight, although a dog slept on the porch of one, and a load of wash hung from a line in the yard of another. Uncle Al stopped beside an old truck parked in the shade of the barn. Nobody answered when he called out, but when they walked behind the barn they found an old man leaning against the whitewashed gate of a corral. Inside the corral lay two dead horses. A single buzzard sat immobile on top of each horse as if waiting for the old man to say a grace. Jim pinched his nose and held it closed. The scaly red heads of the buzzards were fierce and ugly.

"Howdy," Uncle Al said, looking at the horses.

"Howdy," the old man said.

"Are you Mr. Harvey Hartsell?"

The old man laughed as if the question were a good joke. He winked at Jim. He said, "Do I look like Mr. Harvey Hartsell to you?"

The old man didn't have any teeth. His face collapsed in on itself whenever he wasn't talking. Jim was sure Mr. Harvey Hartsell would have had teeth.

"I don't know what Harvey Hartsell looks like," Uncle Al said. "But you don't have to get smart about it."

Jim stared up at Uncle Al. He had never heard any of the uncles speak rudely to a stranger. The old man, however, did not seem to notice. He tucked his thumbs into his armpits and flapped his arms up and down.

"What Harvey Hartsell looks like is a jailbird," he said. "He shot these here horses to keep the bank from gettin' 'em. He shot every animal on the place, and they locked him up."

"Good Lord," Uncle Al said.

"Everybody told me, they said, 'You better not be sneaking around Mr. Harvey Hartsell's place,' but I said, 'It ain't Mr. Harvey Hartsell's place no more, now, is it? What is he going to do to me?' " The old man seemed pleased with the thought. He put his foot up on the lowest bar of the gate as if he owned it. "I used to work for Harvey Hartsell, but he tried to cheat me on my shares. When I called him on it, he run me off. Now he's in jail."

Jim found himself siding with Mr. Harvey Hartsell, even though he had shot the horses they had come all this way to see.

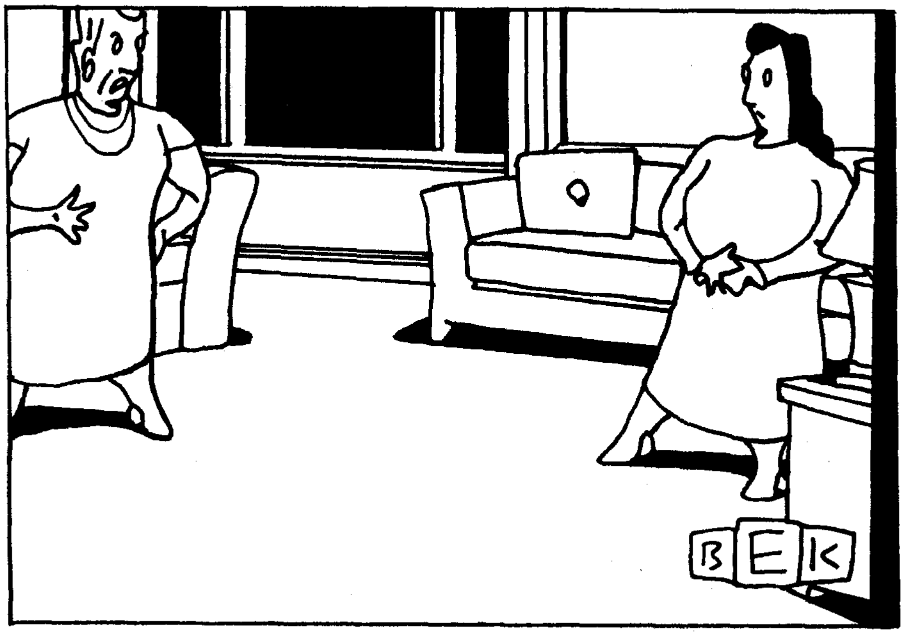
"Them horses," the old man said, "was *Belgiums*."

"Belgians," Uncle Al said.

He leaned over and climbed through the bars of the gate and walked slowly across the corral. One of the buzzards grabbed on to the air with its great wings and flew heavily across the fields. The other buzzard, however, raised its wings and squawked at Uncle Al. The sun shone through its feathers. Jim would have found the wings beautiful, had they not been attached to the buzzard's lizard head. Uncle Al stopped, pulled the pistol out of his pocket, and pointed it at the bird.

"Uh-oh," the old man said. "Time to go." He hurried stiffly around the side of the barn, holding on to his hat.

Jim let go of his nose and stuck his fingers in his ears. After a second, he thought better of it and pinched his nose shut again. The shot wasn't as loud as he had thought it would be: it sounded flat and thin in the heat and did not make an echo. The buzzard folded its wings carefully into place and fell sleepily off the horse. A thin veil of flies rose above the horse for a moment, in what seemed to Jim the shape of a horse, but quickly settled back down. Uncle Al replaced the pistol in his pocket and walked over to where the horses lay. Jim had not realized how big they were until he saw Uncle Al standing beside them. They had been immense animals, bigger than any mule he had ever seen. They looked like they could have pulled the barn down, had Uncle Al been able to coax them up and into harness. Uncle Al looked down at the dead horses a long time. He did not seem to mind the smell.



"What am I supposed to say when my friends ask why you're still a mid-list author?"

INSTEAD of heading back to Aliceville, Uncle Al drove from Florence toward Myrtle Beach. He said that he had never seen the ocean, and thought that he might as well take a look. This was unusual behavior, because Uncle Al had work to do back home. But the change of plan suited Jim fine: he had never seen the ocean, either.

The highway they followed soon dropped down into the coastal lowland. Dark, still water lay on both sides of the road, and snakes of moss hung down from gnarled, gray trees. It took a long time to pass through such places, and Jim was glad they didn't have to stop. When the road rose up out of the swamps, it led through small settlements of dilapidated cabins and yards filled with chickens and small, dirty children. Dogs of all colors and sizes flew from underneath porches and gamely chased the truck, snapping viciously at its tires. Field hands in straw hats or bright head rags stared up from rows of cotton or tobacco as the strange truck passed. Occasionally Jim spied large white houses, set back in the trees, far back from the road. He wondered whether the bank would get these places, too, and whether their owners would stalk through their barns and pastures, killing everything in sight. For the first time since leaving Aliceville, Jim found himself longing for home.

Eventually they entered a desolate barren in which there was nothing at all to see except pine trees. But when they crossed out of the pines, they discovered the wide sea. Jim's breath caught in his throat like it was afraid to come out. He tried to breathe several times, but drew no air. He wished that just for a moment, until he grew used to the sight, the ocean would simply *hold still.* But the waves lined up and bore down on the wide, white beach like a gang of boys intent on jumping a gully. Each wave rose up and took a running go, rushed toward South Carolina, and cast itself down on the sand.

"Well, there it is," Uncle Al said.

"There it is," Jim said.

"The Atlantic Ocean."

"Yes, sir."

"It's amazing a man can live his whole life and never think about something that big."

"Yes, sir."

"I guess we studied it in school, but I don't remember. I don't remember the last time I thought about the ocean."

"No, sir."

"But there it is."

"Yes, sir."

They got out of the truck and started down the dune toward the beach. The dune was covered with a type of oats that rattled in the wind from the sea. Uncle Al stopped and studied them closely; Jim stood first on one foot and then the other and paid the oats no attention at all. The sand was burning his feet. Once they reached the beach the sand was cooler, but the roar of the water was fiercer than up on the dune. Jim could taste the salty water, broken up and falling through the air. He reached up and grabbed Uncle Al's hand.

"We probably shouldn't get in that water, Jim," Uncle Al said. "We don't know anything about that water."

"I'm not going to," Jim said.

They stopped well short of the dark line on the sand that marked the farthest approach of the sea. They looked for a while at the place in the distance where the blue sky and the blue water became the same thing. At the edge of the surf, a small white bird with long legs ran up and down. It ran up the slope of the beach toward the dune when the waves came in, and toward the water when they went back out. It seemed to be looking for something it could not find in the dangerous place where the water stopped and the land began. When they got too close, it flew away, crying out "*Kee-kee-kee.*"

"Jim," Uncle Al said, "I just want you to know that we don't owe anybody anything. We pay as we go. Do you understand that?"

"Yes, sir."

"I just wanted you to know."

"Yes, sir."

Jim thought for a minute and pointed

at the ocean. "Is our river in there?"

"Somewhere," Uncle Al said, "but I'd hate to have to hunt for it."

"Me, too," Jim said. He thought for a moment more and said, "Does the ocean touch Belgium?"

"For a little ways, I think," Uncle Al said.

"Why did you shoot that buzzard?"

"I don't know. I just couldn't stand to see a buzzard standing on a horse."

"Oh," Jim said.

"I shouldn't have, I don't guess. He was just doing what buzzards do."

"It's O.K., Uncle Al."

"Don't ever make fun of the misfortune of others, Jim."

"I won't."

"No good will ever come of it. God will bring you down. If you use his blessings to look down on other people, it's like cussing. It's like taking his name in vain. Do you understand that?"

"Yes, sir."

Uncle Al took off his hat and wiped his face with the back of his sleeve. "It's been a long trip, hasn't it, Jim?"

"Yes, sir."

"I'm about ready to go home and stay there. You want to get in that water first?"

"No."

"I think we should."

"I don't want to."

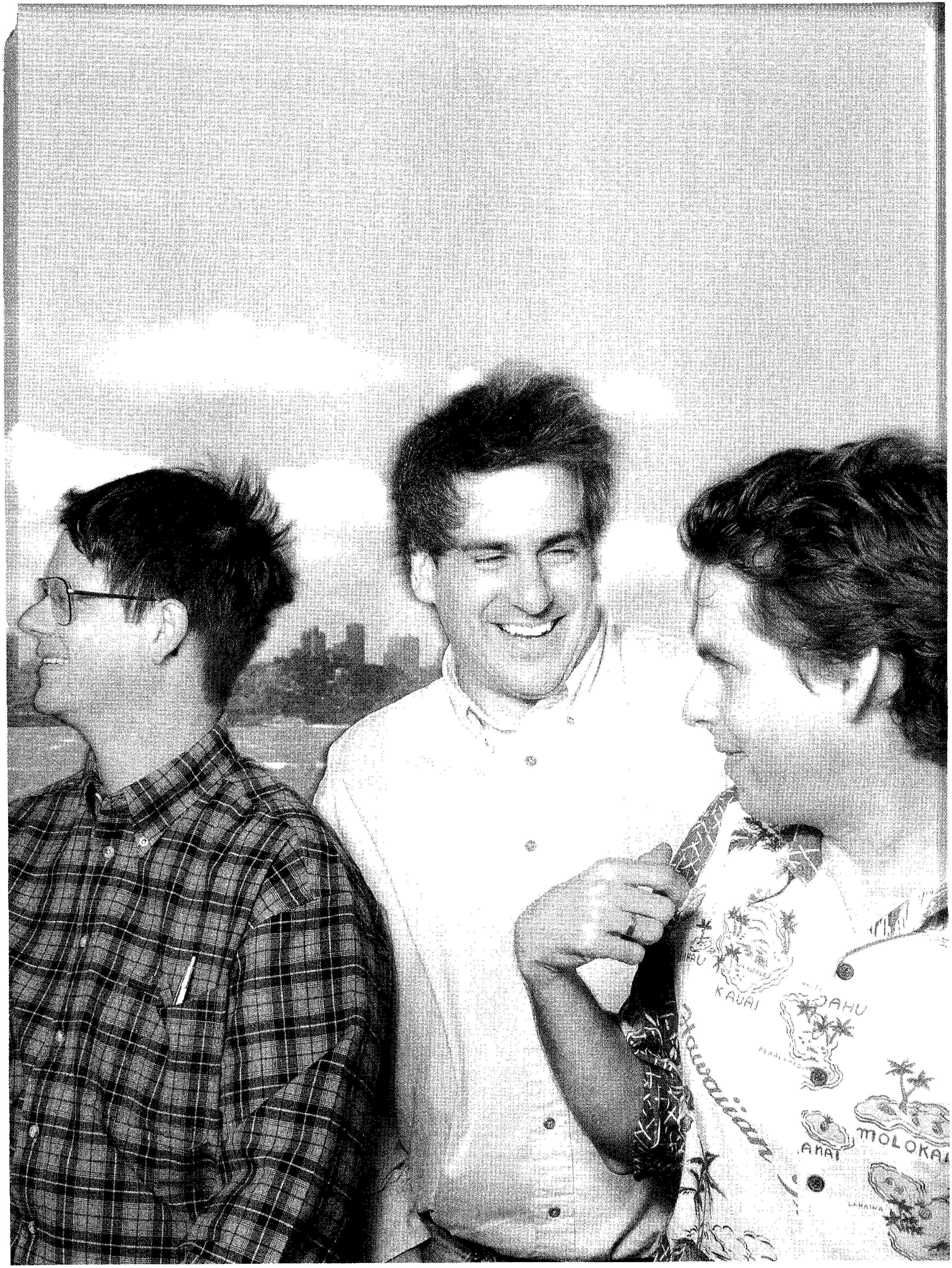
"Just a little ways," Uncle Al said. "I won't let it get you. That way, when we get back home we can tell Zeno and Coran that we got in the Atlantic Ocean."

Uncle Al took off his shoes and socks and dropped them onto the sand. He rolled up the legs of his overalls and led Jim to the edge of the sea, where a wave, and then another, slid up over their ankles. The water was warmer than Jim had imagined it would be. A fish no bigger than a thought swam by his feet; when he wiggled his toes it vanished as if made of light. In the water he could feel the river that flowed through the uncles' fields. Maybe Uncle Zeno or Uncle Coran had looked at the river that morning. Maybe they had wet a bandanna in its water and wiped the sweat off their faces. Jim held on to Uncle Al's hand and closed his eyes and tried to feel Belgium. He tried until he grew dizzy and felt the water writing strange words on his feet. But when he opened his eyes all he saw was ocean, the strong water rearing up.

"I wish we could have got there sooner," Uncle Al said.

"Me, too," Jim said. ♦

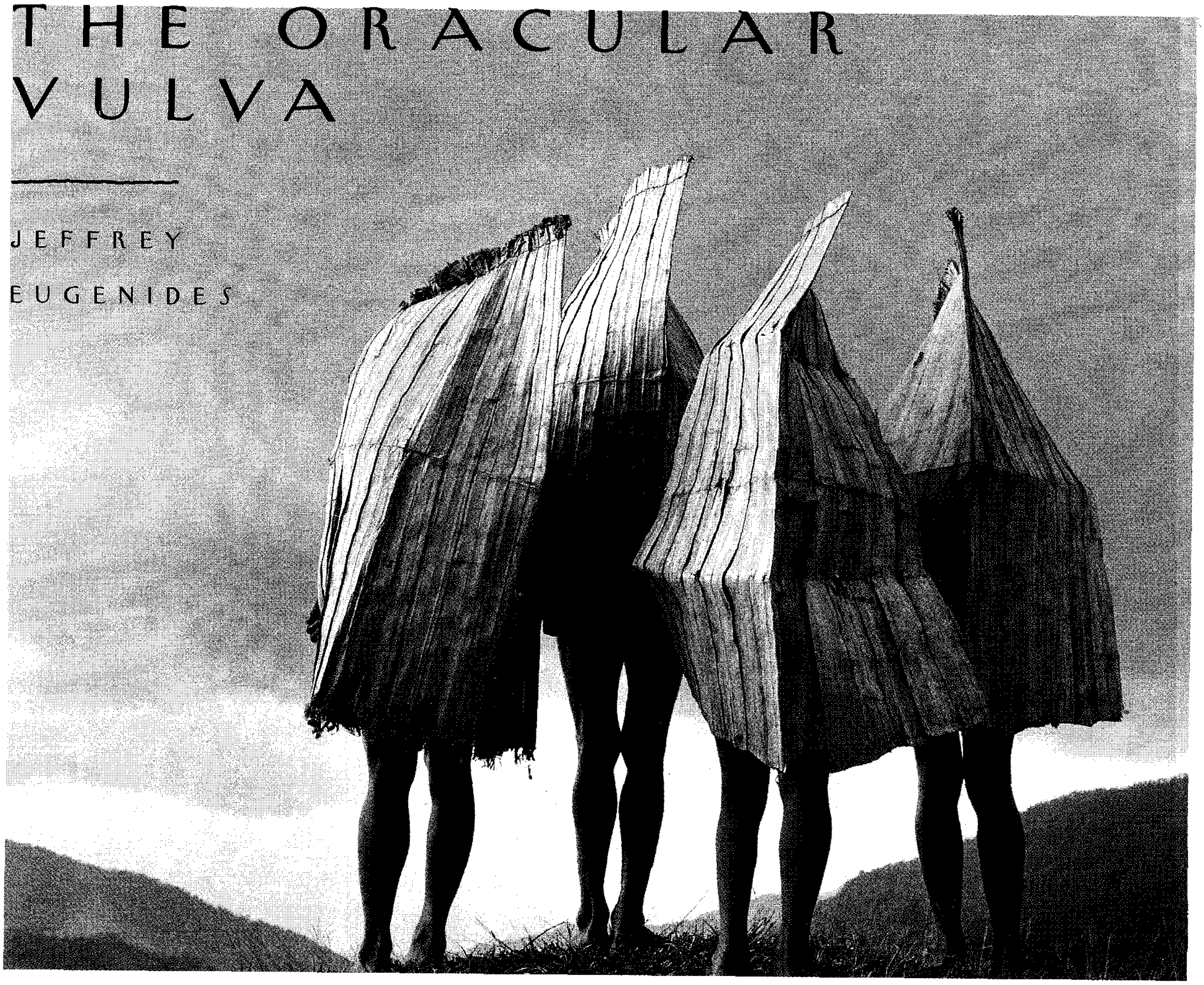
Left to right: Antonya Nelson, Sherman Alexie, William T. Vollmann, Ethan Canin, and



ichael Chabon. Photograph by Chris Callis.

THE ORACULAR VULVA

JEFFREY EUGENIDES



CHRIS RAINIER

Skulls make better pillows than you think. Dr. Peter Luce (the famous sexologist) rests his cheek on the varnished parietal of a Dawat ancestor, he's not sure whose. The skull tips back and forth, jawbone to chin, as Luce himself is gently rocked by the boy on the next skull over, rubbing his feet against Luce's back. The pandanus mat feels scratchy against his bare legs.

It's the middle of the night, the time when, for some reason, all the yammering jungle creatures shut up for a minute. Luce's specialty isn't zoology. He's paid scant attention to the local fauna since coming here. He hasn't told anybody on the team, but he's phobic about snakes and so hasn't wandered too far from the village. When the others go off to hunt boar or chop sago, Luce stays in to brood on his situation. (Specifically: his ruined career, but there are other complaints.) Only one brave, drunken night, going out to pee, did he venture away from the longhouses to stand in the dense vegetation for roughly thirty-five seconds before getting creeped out and hurrying back. He doesn't know what goes on out in the jungle and he doesn't care. All he knows is that every night at sundown the monkeys and birds start screaming and then, around 1 P.M. New York time—to which his luminous wristwatch is still faithfully set—they stop. It gets perfectly quiet. So quiet that Luce wakes up. Or sort of wakes up. His eyes are open now, at least he thinks they are. Not that it makes any difference. This is the jungle during the new moon. This is the dictionary definition of darkness. Luce holds his hand in front of his face, palm to nose, unable to see it. He shifts his cheek on the skull, causing the boy to stop rubbing momentarily and let out a soft, submissive cry.

Wetly, like a vapor—he's definitely awake now—the jungle invades his nostrils. He's never smelled anything like it before. The jungle. It's like mud and feces mixed with armpit and worm. Though that doesn't quite cover it. There's also scent of wild pig, slime of slug, the cheesy whiff of six-foot orchids, and the corpse breath of carnivorous flytraps. All around the village, from the swampy ground up to the tops of trees, animals are eating each other and digesting with open, burping mouths.

Evolution has no consistent game plan. While famous for remaining true to certain elegant forms (Dr. Luce likes to point out, for instance, the structural similarity between mussels and the female genitalia), it can also, on a whim, improvise. That's what evolution is: a scattershot of possibilities, proceeding not by successive improvements but just by changes, some good, some bad, none thought out beforehand. The marketplace—that is, life, the world—decides. So that here, on the Casuarinen coast, the flowers have evolved traits that Luce, a Connecticut boy, doesn't associate with flowers, though botany isn't his specialty, either. He thought flowers were supposed to smell nice. To attract bees. Here it's something different. The few lurid blooms he's unwisely stuck his snout into have smelled pretty much like death. There's always a little pool of rainwater inside the cup (actually digestive acid) and a winged beetle being eaten away. Luce'll snap his head back, holding his nose, and then, in the bushes somewhere, he'll hear a few Dawat laughing their heads off.

These ruminations are interrupted by the puling of the boy on the next skull over. "*Cemen*," the boy cries out. "*Ake cemen*." There's silence, a few Dawat muttering to themselves in dreams, and then, just like every night, Luce feels the kid's hand come snaking into his shorts. He grabs it gently by the wrist, fishing for his penlight with his other hand. He switches it on and the pale beam illuminates the boy's face. He's resting his cheek on a skull, too (his grandfather's, to be precise), which is stained a dark orange from years of hair and skin oil. Beneath his kinky hair the boy's eyes are wide, frightened by the light. He looks a little like a young Jimi Hendrix. His nose is wide and flat, his cheekbones prominent. His full lips have a permanent pout from speaking the explosive Dawat language. "*Ake cemen*," he goes again, which is maybe a word. His trapped hand makes another lunge for Luce's midsection, but Luce redoubles his grip.

So, then, the other complaints: Having to do field work at his age, for one thing. Getting mail yesterday for the first time in eight weeks, ripping open the soggy packet with excitement only to find, right on the cover of the *New England Journal of Medicine*, Pappas-Kikuchi's spurious study. And, more immediately, the kid.

"Come on, now," Luce says. "Go back to sleep."

"*Cemen. Ake cemen!*"

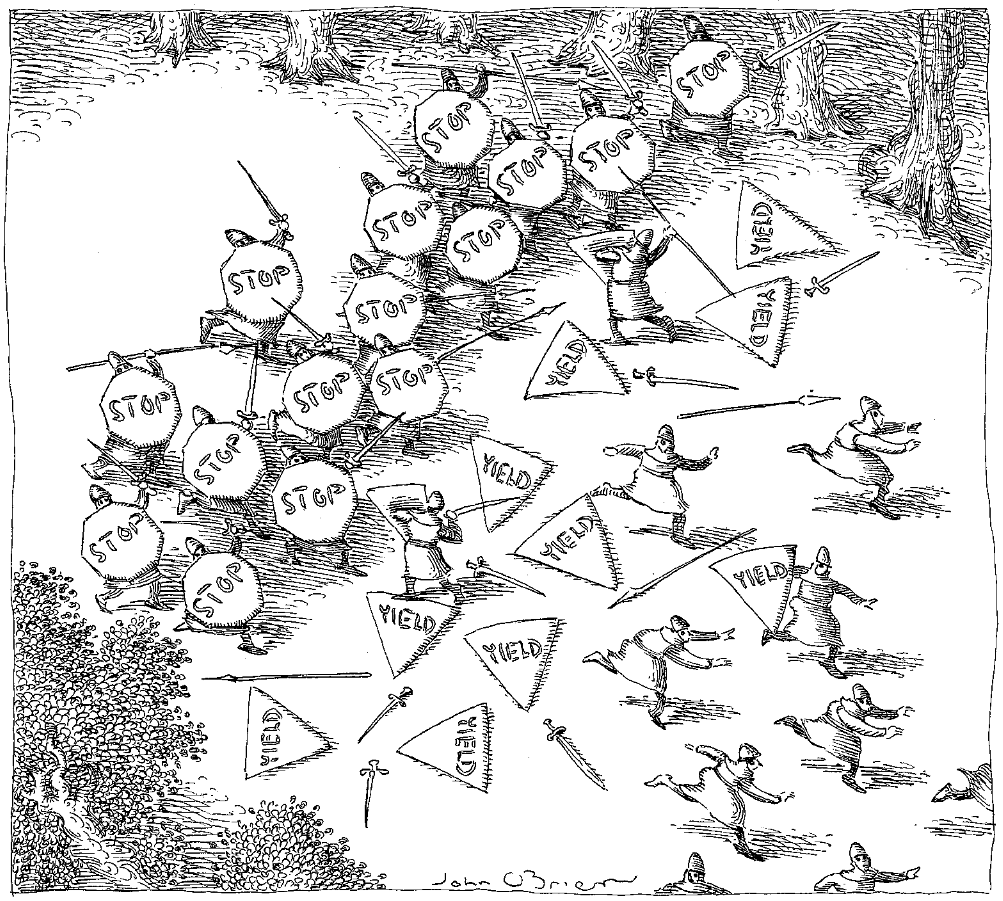
"Thanks for the hospitality, but no thanks."

The kid turns and looks into the darkness of the hut, and when he turns back the penlight's beam shows tears welling in his eyes. He's scared. He tugs at Luce, bowing his head and pleading. "You ever hear of a thing called professional ethics, kid?" Luce says. The boy stops, looks at him, trying to understand, then starts tugging again.

The kid's been after him for three straight weeks. It's not that he's in love or anything. Among the many rare characteristics of the Dawat—not the precise biological oddity that has brought Luce and his team to Irian Jaya but a related anthropological one—is that the tribe maintains strict segregation between the sexes. The village is laid out in a dumbbell shape, thinning in the middle with a longhouse at either end. The men and boys sleep in one longhouse; the women and girls in the other. Dawat males consider contact with females highly polluting, and so have organized social structures to limit exposure as much as possible. Dawat men, for instance, go into the women's longhouse only for the purpose of procreation. They do what they have to do quickly and then leave. According to Randy, the anthropologist who speaks Dawat, the Dawat word for "vagina" translates literally as "that thing which is truly no good." This, of course, incensed Sally Ward, the endocrinologist who came along to analyze plasma hormone levels, and who has little tolerance for so-called cultural differences and out of sheer disgust and justified anger has been denigrating the field of anthropology to Randy's face whenever she gets the chance. Which is not often, because by tribal law she has to stay down at the other end of the village. What it's like over there Luce has no idea. The Dawat have erected an earthwork between the two areas, a mud wall about five feet high with spears jutting up. Impaled on the spears are oblong green gourds that at first looked refreshingly festive to Luce, sort of like Venetian lanterns, until Randy explained that the gourds are only stand-ins for the human heads of yesteryear. At any rate, you can't see much over the earthwork, and there's only a little pathway where the women leave food for the men and through which the men go, once a month, to mount their wives for three and a half minutes.

As papal as the Dawat appear to be in reserving sex for procreation, they are a hard sell for the local missionaries. They're not exactly celibate in the Longhouse of Men. Dawat boys live with their mothers until they're seven years old, at which point they come to live with the men. For the next eight years the boys are taught, encouraged, and coerced into fellating their elders. With the denigration of the vagina in Dawat belief comes the exaltation of the male sexual parts, and especially of semen, which is held to be an elixir of stunning nutritive power. In order to become men, to become warriors, boys must ingest as much semen as possible, and this, nightly, daily, hourly, they do. Their first night in the longhouse, Luce and his assistant, Mort, were taken aback, to say the least, when they saw the sweet little boys going dutifully from man to man as if bobbing for apples. Randy just sat taking notes. After all the men had been satisfied, one of the chieftains, in what no doubt was a show of hospitality, barked something at two boys, who then came over to the American scientists. "That's O.K.," Mort had said to his kid. "I'm fine." Even Luce felt himself breaking out into a sweat. Around the hut, the boys went about their business either cheerfully or with mild resignation, like kids back home doing chores. It impressed upon Luce once again the fact that sexual shame was a social construct, completely relative to culture. Still, his culture was American, specifically, Anglo-Irish lapsed Episcopalian, and he refused the Dawat offer graciously, that night and, now, this.

The irony, however, isn't lost on him that he, Dr. Peter Luce, director of the Sexual Disorders and Gender Identity Clinic, past general secretary of the Society for the Scientific Study of Sex (S.S.S.S.), champion of the open investigation of human sexual behavior, opponent of prudishness, scourge of inhibition, and crusader for physical delights of all kinds, should find himself, halfway around the world in the erotic jungle, feeling so uptight. In his annual address to the society in 1969, Dr. Luce had reminded the assembled sexologists of the historical conflict between scientific research and common morality. Look at Vesalius, he said. Look at Galileo. Always practical, Luce had advised his listeners to travel to foreign countries where so-called "aber-



rant" sexual practices were tolerated and consequently easier to study (sodomy in Holland, for instance, and prostitution in Phuket). He prided himself on his open mind. To him, human sexuality was like a great big Bruegel painting and he loved watching all the action. Luce tried not to make value judgments about the sundry clinically documented paraphilias, and only when they were patently injurious (as with pedophilia or rape) did he object. This tolerance went even further when dealing with another culture. The blow jobs being performed in the Longhouse of Men might upset Luce if they were happening at the Y.M.C.A. on West Twenty-third Street, but here he feels he has no right to condemn. It doesn't help his work. He isn't here as a missionary. Given the local mores, these boys aren't likely to be warped by their oral duties. They aren't growing up to be typical heterosexual husbands, anyway. They just move from being givers to being receivers, and everyone's happy.

But then why does Luce get so upset every time the kid starts rubbing his feet against his back and making his little mating calls? It might have something to do with the increasingly anxious sound of the calls themselves, not to mention the kid's worried expression. It may be that if the kid doesn't pleasure the foreign guests he's in for some kind of punishment. Luce can't explain the kid's fervor any other way. Is white semen believed to possess special power? Unlikely, given the way Luce, Randy, and Mort look these days. They look like hell: greasy-haired, dandruffy. The Dawat probably think that all white men are covered with heat rashes. Luce longs for a shower. He longs to put on his cashmere turtleneck, his ankle boots, and his suède blazer and go out for a whiskey sour. After this trip, the most exotic he wants to get is dinner at Lucky Cheng's. And if all goes well, that's how it's going to be. Him and a mai tai with a parasol in it, back in Manhattan.

Up until three years ago—until the night Pappas-Kikuchi blindsided him with her field work—Dr. Peter Luce was considered the world's leading authority on human hermaphroditism. He was the author of a major sexological work, "The Oracular Vulva," which was standard reading in a variety of disciplines ranging from genetics and pediatrics to psychology. He had written a column of the same name for *Playboy* from the August, 1969, issue to the December, 1973, in which the conceit was that a personified and all-knowing female pudendum answered the queries of male readers with witty and sometimes sibylline responses. Hugh Hefner had come across Peter Luce's name in the newspaper in an article about a demonstration for sexual freedom. Six Columbia students had staged an orgy in a tent on the main green, which the cops broke up, and when he was asked what he thought about such activity on campus Assistant Professor Peter Luce, thirty-four, had been quoted as saying, "I'm in favor of orgies wherever they happen." That caught Hef's eye. Not wanting to replicate Xaviera Hollander's "Call Me Madam" column in *Penthouse*, Hefner saw Luce's column as being devoted to the scientific and historic side of sex. Thus, in her first three issues, the Oracular Vulva delivered disquisitions on the erotic art of the Japanese painter Hiroshi Yamamoto, the epidemiology of syphilis, and the custom of the berdache among the Navajo, all in the ghostly, rambling style that Luce modelled on his aunt Rose Pepperdine, who used to lecture him on the Bible while soaking her feet in the kitchen. The column proved popular, though intelligent queries were always hard to come by, the readership being more interested in the "Playboy Advisor" 's cunnilingus tips or remedies for premature ejaculation. Finally, Hefner told Luce to screw it and write his own questions, which he did.

Peter Luce had appeared on Phil Donahue in 1987, along with two hermaphrodites and a transsexual, to discuss both the medical and psychological aspects of these conditions. On that program Phil Donahue said, "Ann

Parker was born and raised a girl. You won the Miss Miami Beach Contest in 1968 in good old Dade County, Florida? Boy, wait till they hear this. You lived as a woman to the age of twenty-nine and then you switched to living as a man. He has the anatomical characteristics of both a man and a woman. If I'm lyin', I'm dyin'."

He also said, "Here's what's not so funny. These live, irreplaceable sons and daughters of God, human beings all, want you to know, among other things, that that's exactly what they are, human beings."

LUCE'S interest in hermaphroditism had begun nearly thirty years ago, when he was still a resident at Mount Sinai. A sixteen-year-old girl had come in to be examined. Her name was Felicity Kennington, and his first glimpse of her had inspired some unprofessional thoughts. She was very good-looking, Felicity Kennington, slender and bookish, with glasses, which always killed him.

Luce examined her with a grave face and concluded, "You've got lentigines."

"What?" the girl asked, alarmed.

"Freckles." He smiled. Felicity Kennington smiled back. Luce remembered that his brother asked him one night, with a lot of suggestive eyebrow movement, if he didn't sometimes get turned on examining women, and that he'd responded with the old line about how you're so caught up in your work you don't even notice. He had no trouble noticing Felicity Kennington, her pretty face, her pink gums and child-sized teeth, her shy white legs which she kept crossing and uncrossing as she sat on the examining table. The thing he didn't notice was her mother, sitting in the corner of the room.

"Lissie," the woman broke in, "tell the doctor about the pain you've been having."

Felicity blushed, looking down at the floor. "It's in my—it's just below my stomach."

"What kind of pain?"

"There's kinds?"

"A sharp pain or dull?"

"Sharp."

At that point in his career, Luce had given a total of eight pelvic exams. The one he gave to Felicity Kennington still ranks as one of the most difficult. First, there was the problem of his terrible attraction. He was only twenty-five himself. He was nervous; his heart throbbed. He dropped the speculum and had to go out for another. The way Felicity Kennington turned her face away and bit her lower lip before parting her knees made him literally dizzy. Second, the mother's watching him the whole time didn't make it any easier. He'd suggested that she wait outside, but Mrs. Kennington had replied, "I'll stay here with Lissie, thank you." Third, and worst of all, was the pain he seemed to cause Felicity Kennington with everything he did. The speculum wasn't even halfway in before she cried out. Her knees vised, and he had to give up. Next, he tried merely to palpate her genitals but as soon as he pressed she shrieked again. Finally, he had to get Dr. Budekind, a gynecologist, to complete the examination while he looked on, his stomach in knots. The gynecologist looked at Felicity for no more than fifteen seconds, then took Luce across the hall.

"What's the matter with her?"

"Undescended testes."

"What?"

"Looks like adrenogenital syndrome. Ever seen one before?"

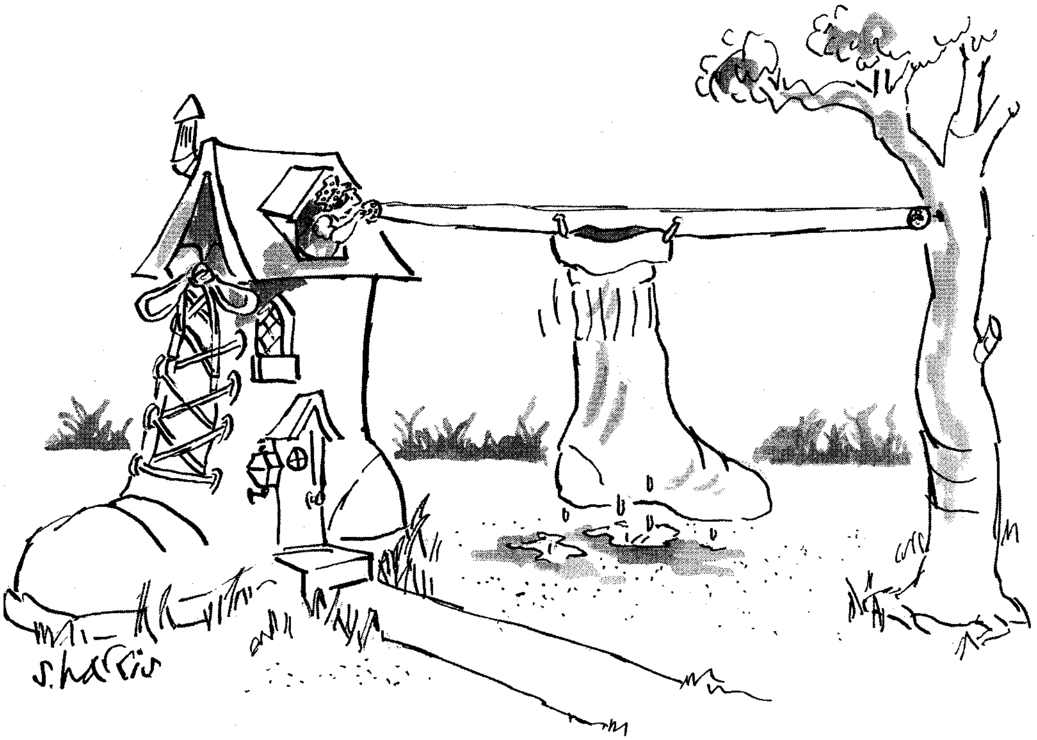
"No."

"That's what you're here to do, right? Learn."

"That girl has, has testes?"

"We'll know in a little while."

The tissue mass up inside Felicity Kennington's inguinal canal turned out to be, when they put a sample under the microscope, testicular. At that time—this was in 1961—such a fact designated Felicity Kennington as male. Since the nineteenth century, medicine had been using the same primitive diagnostic criterion of sex formulated by Edwin Klebs way back in 1876. Klebs had maintained that a person's gonads determined sex. In cases of ambiguous gender, you looked at the gonadal tissue under the microscope. If it was testicular, the person was male; if ovarian, female. But there were problems inherent in this method. And these became clear to Luce when he saw what happened to Felicity Kennington in 1961. Even though she looked like a girl and thought of herself as a girl, because she possessed male gonads Budekind declared her to be a boy. The parents objected. Other doctors were consulted—endocrinologists, urologists, geneticists—but they couldn't agree, either. Meanwhile, as the medical community vacillated, Felicity began to go through puberty. Her voice deepened. She grew



sparse tufts of light-brown facial hair. She stopped going to school and soon stopped leaving the house altogether. Luce saw her one last time, when she came in for another consultation. She wore a long dress and a scarf that tied under her chin, covering most of her face. In one nail-bitten hand she carried a copy of "Jane Eyre." Luce bumped into her at the drinking fountain. "Water tastes like rust," she said, looking up at him with no recognition and hurrying away. A week later, with her father's .45 automatic, she killed herself.

"Proves she was a boy," Budekind said in the cafeteria the next day.

"What do you mean?" said Luce.

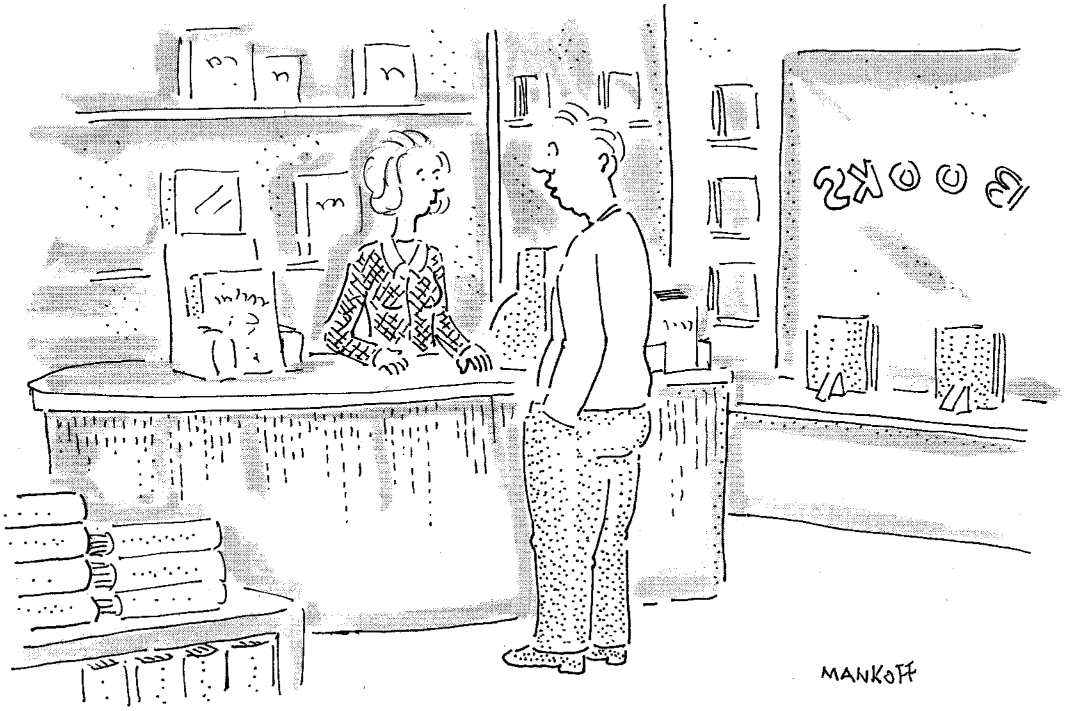
"Boys kill themselves with guns. Statistically. Girls use less violent methods. Sleeping pills, carbon-monoxide poisoning."

Luce never spoke to Budekind again. His meeting with Felicity Kennington was a watershed moment. From then on, he dedicated himself to making sure that something like that never happened to anyone again. He threw himself into the study of hermaphroditic conditions. He read everything available on the subject, which wasn't much. And the more he studied and the more he read, the more he became convinced that the sacred categories of male and female were, in fact, shams. With certain genetic and hormonal conditions, it was just plain impossible to say what sex some babies were. But humans had historically resisted the obvious conclusion. Confronted with a hermaphroditic baby, the Spartans would leave the infant on a rocky hillside and walk quickly away. Luce's own forebears, the English, didn't even like to mention the subject and might never have done so, had the nuisance of enigmatic genitalia not thrown a wrench into the smooth workings of inheritance law. Lord Coke, the great British jurist of the seventeenth century, tried to clear up the matter of who'd get the landed estates by declaring that a person should "be either male or female, and it shall succeed according to the kind of sex which doth prevail." Of course, he didn't specify a method for determining which sex *did* prevail. It took the German Klebs to come along and begin the task. Then, a hundred years later, Peter Luce finished it.

In 1965, Luce published an article called "Many Roads Lead to Rome: Sexual Concepts of Human Hermaphroditism." In twenty-five pages, Luce argued that gender is determined by a variety of influences: chromosomal sex; gonadal sex; hormones; internal genital structures; external genitals; and, most important, the sex of rearing. Often a patient's gonadal sex didn't determine his or her gender identity. Gender was more like a native tongue. Children learn to speak Male or Female, the way they learn to speak English or French.

The article made a big splash. Luce could still remember how, in the weeks following its publication, people gave him a new quality of attention: women laughed at his jokes more, made it known that they were available, even on a few occasions showed up at his apartment wearing not a hell of a lot; his phone rang more often; the people on the other end were people he didn't know but who knew him; they had offers and beguilements; they wanted him to review papers, serve on panels, appear at the San Luis Obispo Snail Festival to judge an escargot contest, most snails being, after all, dioecious. Within months, pretty much everyone had given up Klebs's criterion for Luce's criteria.

On the strength of this success, Luce was given the opportunity to open a psychohormonal unit at Columbia-Presbyterian Hospital. In a decade of solid, original research, he made his second great discovery: that gender identity is established very early on in life, at about the age of two. After that, his reputation reached the stratosphere. The funding flowed in, from the Rockefeller Foundation, the Ford Foundation, and the N.I.H. It was a great time to be a sexologist. The Sexual Revolution had opened a brief window of opportunity for the enterprising sex researcher. It was a matter of national interest, for a few years there, to get to the bottom of the mystery of the female orgasm. Or to plumb the psychological reasons that certain men exhibited themselves on the street. In 1968, Dr. Luce opened the Sexual Disorders and Gender Identity Clinic, and it soon became the foremost facility in the world for the study and treatment of conditions of ambiguous gender. Luce treated everybody: the web-necked teens with Turner's syndrome; the leggy beauties with androgen insensitivity; the surly Klinefelter's



"Do you have 'Intelligence for Idiots'?"

YELLOW POPPIES

I'm mortally impatient for the past to catch up to me,
for it to go on by like a loud car boiling down a dirt road,
a car you hook from a snatch of clattery music, bright glimpse
of a face that looks, maybe it is, beautiful...

I remember everything, but I don't want to.

I've tried to say nothing, but sometimes a fact
or what I remember as a fact slips out, a bit about
my mother that makes her seem mean-spirited, selfish,
or another about one of my brothers licking blood off his arm.

I went up to the country, there were artisans,
each with a family, cars in the driveways with bumper stickers
admonishing everyone behind them to straighten up in some way,
and I thought, There's a group I don't want to be part of.

But such thoughts don't really help.

My father wasn't a war hero,
but he wished he was. My mother was a beauty,
but more of a party girl than a beauty, the smoky type
who would accompany you to the beach
and later argue with you, her eyes flashing,
until you were sorry you met her.
                    Each instance
today seems connected to some occurrence in the past,
and I think sometimes this is a pattern almost like the figure
of imagination itself, the way imagination is the recognition
of unacknowledged correspondences, things lining up,
in other words, like the memory of this afternoon's shower,
in a few hours already a memory of sun streaking the wet grass,
the grass gold like the backs of the hunting dogs, dogs
you saw once at the edge of the pond, milling around her,
or the way the human voice, her voice, say,
could become like a bird's, the way at night sometimes
you could hear her whistling as she returned from a walk,
and you could tell from the sound, even though it was late
and we were far in the country, she had found
a way to make herself happy, for a time, out in the dark.

—CHARLIE SMITH

cases who, without exception, either broke the water cooler or tried to punch out a nurse. When a baby was born with ambiguous genitalia, Dr. Luce was called in to discuss the matter with the shocked parents. Luce got the would-be transsexuals, too. They took the subway up from Times Square and arrived in his office wearing feather boas and smelling like air freshener. Everybody came to the clinic; at his disposal Luce had a body of research material—of living, breathing specimens—that no scientist had ever had before.

It was 1968, and the world was going up in flames. Luce held one of the torches. Two thousand years of sexual tyranny were ending in the blaze. Not one coed in his behavioral-cytogenetics lecture course wore a bra to class. Luce wrote Op-Ed pieces for the *Times* calling for the revision of the penal code regarding socially harmless and nonviolent sex offenders. He handed out pro-contraceptive pamphlets at coffeehouses in the Village. That was how it went in science. Every generation or so, insight, diligence, and the necessities of the moment came together to lift a scientist's work out of the academy and into the culture at large, where it gleamed, a beacon of the future.

FROM deep in the jungle, buzzing in, a mosquito skims past Luce's left ear. It's one of the jumbo models. He never sees them, only hears them, at night, screaming by like airborne lawnmowers. He closes his eyes, wincing, and in another moment, sure enough, feels the insect land in the blood-fragrant skin behind his elbow. It's so big it makes a noise landing, like a raindrop. Luce tilts his head back, squeezing his eyes shut, and says, "Aye-yah." He's dying to swat the bug but he can't; his hands are busy keeping the kid away from his belt. He can't see a thing. On the ground next to his skull the penlight sputters out its weak flame. Luce dropped it in the scuffle that's still in progress. Now it lights up a ten-inch cone of mat. No help at all. Plus, the birds have started up again, signalling the approach of morning. Luce is in an alert fetal position, on his back, holding a twiglike ten-year-old Dawat wrist in each hand. From the position of the wrist he estimates that the kid's head is somewhere in the air over his navel, lolling forward probably. He keeps making these smacking sounds that are very depressing to listen to.

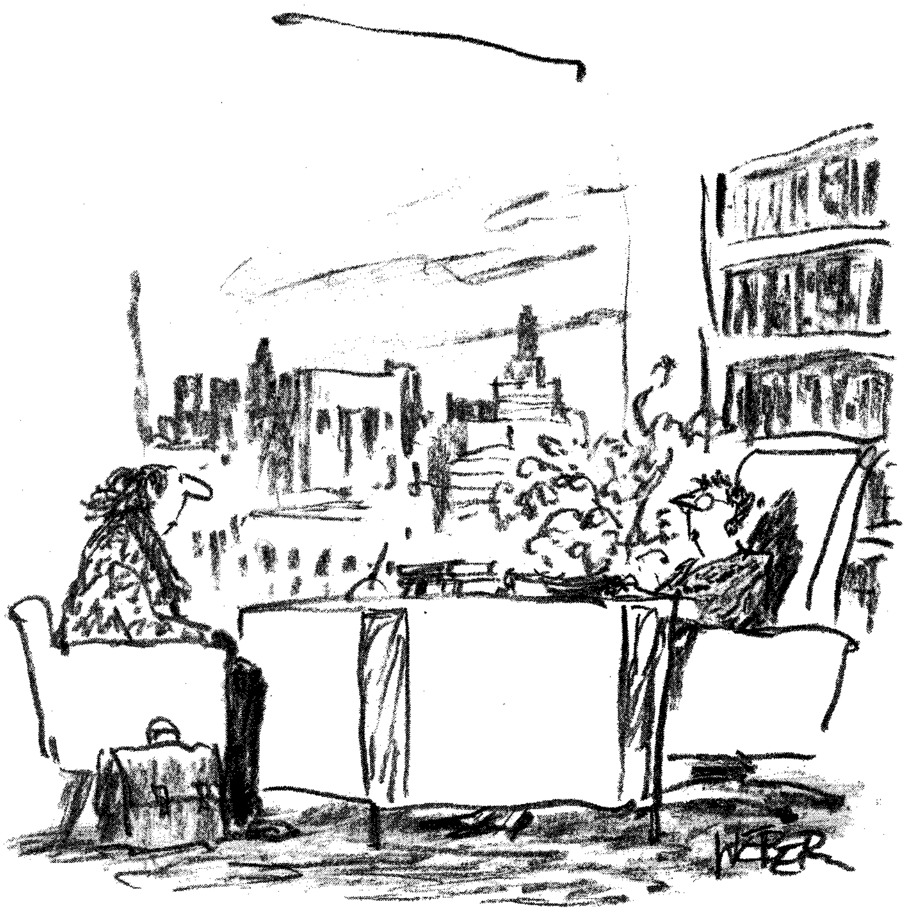
"Aye-yah."

The stinger's in. The mosquito thrusts, wiggles its hips contentedly, then settles down and starts to drink. Luce has had typhus vaccinations that felt more gentle. He can feel the suction. He can feel the bug gaining weight.

A beacon of the future? Who's he kidding? Luce's work casts no more light today, it turns out, than that penlight on the floor. No more light than the new moon not shining above the jungle's canopy.

There's no need for him to read Pappas-Kikuchi's article in the *New England Journal of Medicine*. He heard it all before, in person. Three years ago, at the annual convention of the S.S.S.S., he had arrived late to the last day's last talk.

"This afternoon," Pappas-Kikuchi was saying when he came in, "I'd like to



"Your book is a masterpiece, but, unfortunately, we're rather picky."

share the results of a study our team just completed in southwestern Guatemala."

Luce sat in the back row, careful about his pants. He was wearing a tuxedo. A Pierre Cardin tuxedo. Later that night, the S.S.S.S. was presenting him with a lifetime-achievement award. He took a mini-bar bottle of J. & B. out of his satin-lined pocket and sipped it discreetly. He was already celebrating.

"The village is called San Juan de la Cruz," Pappas-Kikuchi continued. Luce scanned what he could of her behind the podium. She was attractive, in a schoolteacherly way. She had soft, dark eyes and almost absurdly full, unmade-up lips, but something unseen—a big ass, maybe, or fat calves—caused her to be unsure of herself. In Luce's experience, it was exactly these modest, unsexual-seeming women who proved to be the most passionate in bed, whereas women who dressed provocatively were often unresponsive or passive, as if they had used up all their sexual energy in display.

"Male pseudohermaphrodites with five alpha-reductase deficiency syndrome who were raised as females serve as exceptional test cases for studying the effects of testosterone and the sex of rearing in the establishment of gender identity," Pappas-Kikuchi continued, reading from her paper now. "In these cases, decreased production of dihydrotestosterone in utero causes the external genitalia of the affected male fetuses to be highly ambiguous in appearance. Consequently, at birth many affected newborns are considered to be female and are raised as girls. However, prenatal, neonatal, and pubertal exposure to testosterone remains normal."

Luce took another swig of the old J. & B. and threw his arm over the seat next to him. Nothing Pappas-Kikuchi was saying was news. Five alpha-reductase deficiency had been extensively studied. Jason Whitby had done some fine work with 5 (αR) pseudohermaphrodites in Pakistan.

"The scrotum of these newborns is unfused, so that it resembles the labia," Pappas-Kikuchi soldiered on, repeating what everyone already knew. "The phallus, or micropenis, resembles a clitoris. A urogenital sinus ends in a blind vaginal pouch. The testes most often reside in the abdomen or inguinal canal, though occasionally they are found hypertrophied in the bifid scrotum. Nevertheless, at puberty, definite virilization occurs, as plasma testosterone levels are normal."

How old was she? Thirty-two? Thirty-three? Would she be coming to the awards dinner? With her buttoned collar and frumpy coat, Pappas-Kikuchi reminded Luce of a girlfriend he'd had back in college. A classics major who wore Byronic white shirts and unbecoming woollen kneesocks. In bed, however, his little Hellenist had surprised him. Lying on her back, she'd put her legs over his shoulders, telling him that this was Hector and Andromache's favorite position.

Luce was remembering the moment ("I'm Hector!" he'd shouted out, tucking Andromache's ankles behind her ears) when Dr. Fabienne Pappas-Kikuchi announced, "Therefore, these subjects are normal, testosterone-influenced boys who, due to their feminine external genitalia, are mistakenly reared as girls."

"What did she say?" Luce snapped back to attention. "Did she say 'boys'? They're not boys. Not if they weren't raised as boys, they're not."

"The work of Dr. Peter Luce has long been held as gospel in the study of human hermaphroditism," Pappas-Kikuchi now asserted. "Normative, in sexological circles, is his notion that gender identity is fixed at an early age of development. Our research," she paused briefly, "refutes this."

A small popping sound, of a hundred and fifty mouths simultaneously opening, bubbled up through the auditorium's air. Luce stopped in mid-sip.

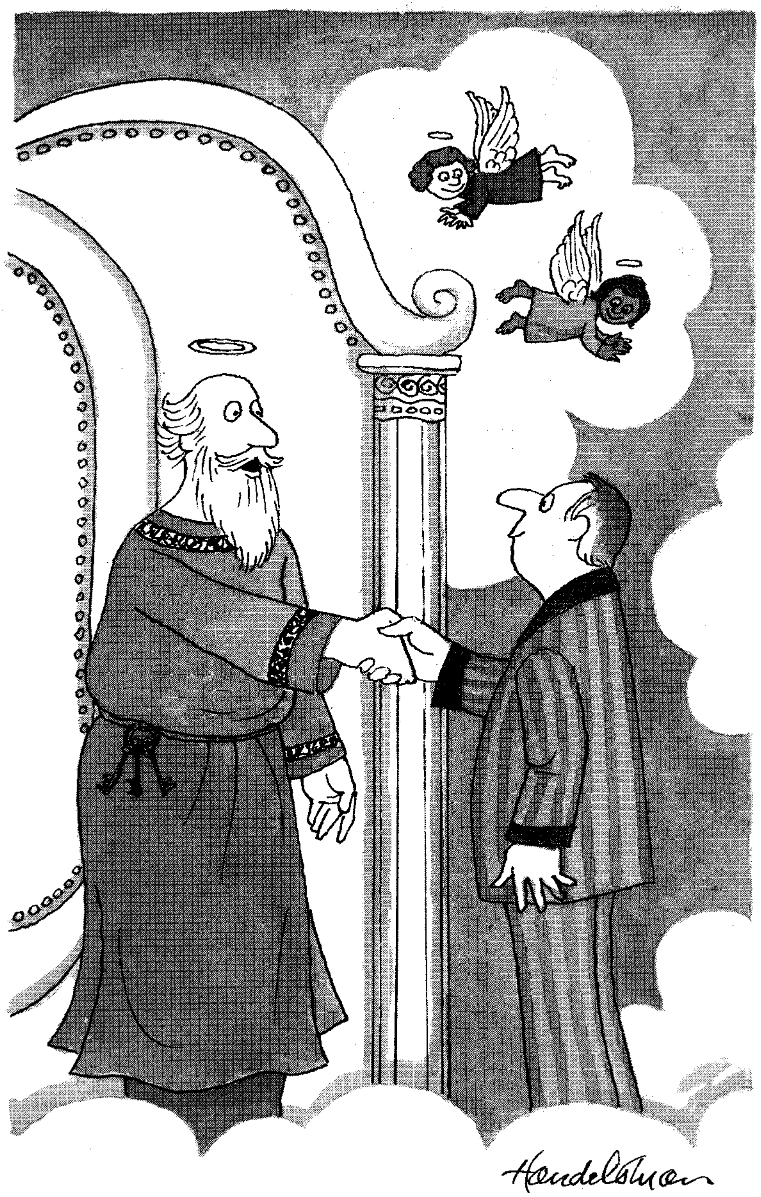
"The data our team collected in Guatemala will confirm that the effect of pubertal androgens on five alpha-reductase pseudohermaphrodites is sufficient to cause a change in gender identity."

Luce couldn't remember much after that. He was aware of being very hot inside his tuxedo. Of quite a few heads turning around to look at him, then only a few heads, then none. At the podium, Dr. Pappas-Kikuchi ran through her data, endlessly, endlessly. "Subject No. 7 changed to a male gender but continues to dress as a woman. Subject No. 12 has the affect and mannerisms of a man and engages in sexual activity with village women. Subject No. 25 married a woman and works as a butcher, a traditionally male occupation. Subject No. 35 was married to a man who left the marriage after a year, at which point the subject assumed a male gender identity. A year later, he married a woman."

The awards ceremony went on as scheduled later that night. Luce, anesthetized on more Scotch in the hotel bar and wearing an Aetna sales rep's blue blazer that he'd mistaken for his tuxedo jacket, had walked to the podium to an absolute minimum of applause and accepted his lifetime-achievement award—a crystal lingam and yoni, hot-glued onto a silver-plated base—which later looked quite beautiful catching the lights of the city as it fell twenty-two floors from his balcony to shatter in the hotel's circular drive. Even then, he was looking west, out over the Pacific, toward Irian Jaya and the Dawat. It took him three years to get research grants from the N.I.H., the National Foundation, March of Dimes, and Gulf & Western, but now he's here, amid another isolated flowering of the 5 (αR) mutation, where he can put Pappas-Kikuchi's theory and his own to the test. He knows who'll win. And when he does, the foundations will begin funding his clinic the way they used to. He can stop subcontracting the back rooms to dentists and that one chiropractor. It's only a matter of time. Randy has persuaded the tribal elders to allow the examinations to go forward. As soon as dawn breaks, they'll be led out to the separate camp where the "turnim-men" live. The mere existence of the local term shows that Luce is right. It's the kind of thing Pappas-Kikuchi would gloss right over.

LUCE'S hands and the kid's are all tangled up. It's like they're playing a game. First Luce covered his belt buckle. Then the kid put his hand over Luce's hand. Then Luce put his hand over the kid's hand. And now the kid covers the whole stack. All these hands struggle, gently. Luce feels tired. He can't see a thing. The jungle is still quiet. He'd like to get another hour of sleep before the morning cry of the monkeys. He's got a big day ahead.

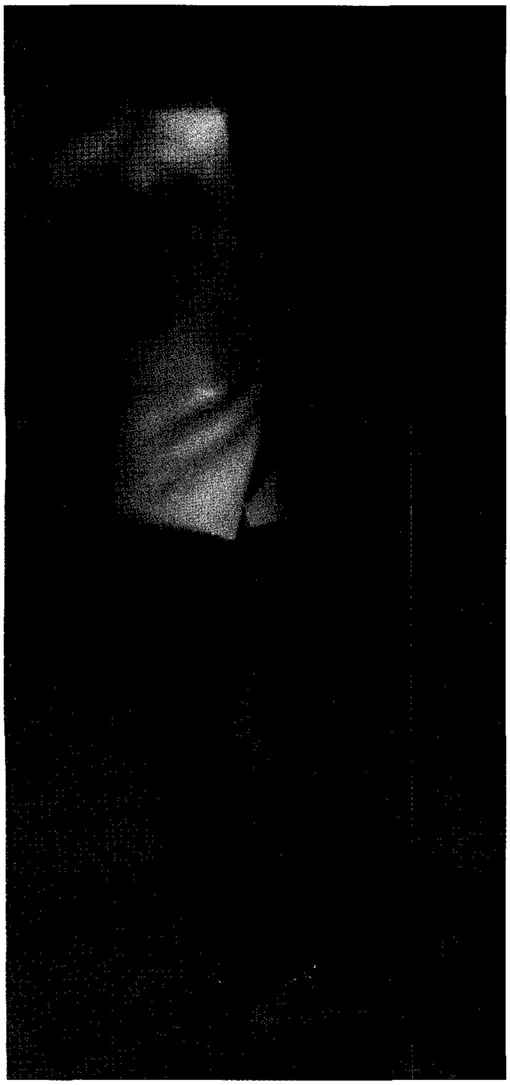
The B-52 buzzes by his ear again, then circles back and goes up his left nostril. "Jesus!" He pulls his hands free and covers his face, but by then the mosquito has taken off again, brushing by his fingers. Luce is half sitting up on the pandanus mat now. He keeps his face covered, because it gives him some kind of comfort, and he just sits there in the dark, feeling suddenly exhausted and sick of the jungle and smelly and hot. Darwin had it easier on H.M.S. Beagle. All he had to do was listen to sermons and play whist. Luce isn't crying, but he feels like it. His nerves are shot. As if from far away, he feels the pressure of the boy's hands again. Undoing his belt. Struggling with the technological puzzle of the zipper. Luce doesn't move. He just keeps his face covered, there in total darkness. A few more days and he can go home. His swanky bachelor pad on West Thirteenth Street awaits him. Finally, the boy figures it out. And it's very dark. And Dr. Peter Luce is open-minded. And there's nothing you can do, after all, about the local customs. ♦

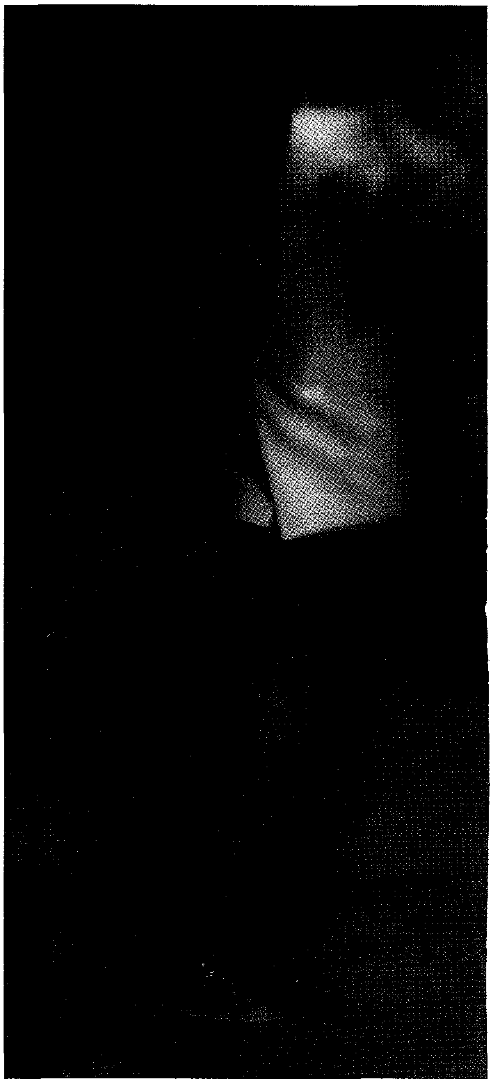


"We've always admired those literate prayers of yours, and it's our hope that you'll keep them coming even though you're dead."

OTRAVIDA, OTRAVEZ

JUNOT DÍAZ





ARLENE GOTTFRIED

He sits on the mattress, the fat spread of his ass popping my fitted sheets from their corners. His clothes are stiff from the cold, and the splatter of dried paint on his pants has frozen into rivets. He smells of bread. He's been talking about the house he wants to buy, how hard it is to find one when you're Latino. When I ask him to stand up so I can fix the bed, he walks over to the window. So much snow, he says. I nod and wish he would be quiet. Ana Iris is trying to sleep on the other side of the room. She has spent half the night praying for her children back in Samaná, and I know that in the morning she has to work at the fábrica. She moves uneasily, buried beneath comforters, her head beneath a pillow. Even here in the States she drapes mosquito netting over her bed.

There's a truck trying to turn the corner, he tells me. I wouldn't want to be that chamaco.

It's a busy street, I say, and it is. Mornings I find the salt and cut rock that the trucks spill onto the front lawn, little piles of treasure in the snow. Lie down, I tell him, and he comes to me, slipping under the covers. His clothes are rough and I wait until it is warm enough under the sheets before I release the buckle to his pants. We shiver together and he does not touch me until we stop.

Yasmin, he says. His mustache is against my ear, sawing at me. We had a man die today at the bread factory. He doesn't speak for a moment, as if the silence is the elastic that will bring his next words forward. This tipo fell from the rafters. Hector found him between the conveyors.

Was he a friend?

This guy, he says. I recruited him at a bar. Told him he wouldn't get cheated.

That's too bad, I say. I hope he doesn't have a family.

Probably does.

Did you see him?

What do you mean?

Did you see him dead?

No. I called the manager and he told me not to let anyone near. He crosses his arms. I do that roof work all the time, he says.

You're a lucky man, Tavito.

Yes, but what if it had been me?

That's a stupid question.

What would you have done?

I set my face against him; he has known the wrong women if he expects more. I want to say, Exactly what your wife's doing in Santo Domingo. Ana Iris mutters in the corner loudly, but she's just pretending. Bailing me out of trouble. He goes quiet because he doesn't want to wake her. After a while he gets up and sits by the window. The snow has started falling again. Radio WADO says this winter will be worse than the last four, maybe the worst in ten years. I watch him: he's smoking, his fingers tracing the thin bones around his eyes, the slack of skin around his mouth. I wonder who he's thinking about. His wife, Amparo, or maybe his child. He has a house in Villa Juana; I've seen the fotos Amparo sent. She looks thin and sad, the dead son at her side. He keeps the pictures in a jar under his bed, very tightly sealed.

We fall asleep without kissing. Later I wake up and so does he. I ask him if he's going back to his place and he says no. The next time I wake up he doesn't. In the cold and darkness of this room he could almost be anybody. I lift his meaty hand. It is heavy and has flour under each nail. Sometimes at night I kiss his knuckles, crinkled as prunes. His hands have tasted of crackers and bread the whole three years we've been together.

He does not talk to me or Ana Iris as he dresses. In his top jacket pocket he carries a blue disposable razor that has begun to show rust on its sharp lip. He soaps his cheeks and chin, the water cold from the pipes, and then scrapes his face clean, trading stubble for scabs. I watch, my naked chest covered with goosebumps. He stomps downstairs and out of the house, a bit of toothpaste on his teeth. As soon as he leaves, I can hear my housemates complaining about him. Doesn't he have his own place to sleep, they'll ask me when I go into the kitchen. And I'll say yes, and smile. From the frosted window I watch him pull up his hood and hitch the triple layer of shirt, sweater, and coat onto his shoulders.

Ana Iris kicks back her covers. What are you doing? she asks me.

Nothing, I say. She watches me dress from under the craziness of her hair.

You have to learn to trust your men, she says. She kisses my nose, heads downstairs. I comb out my hair, sweep the crumbs and pubic hairs from my covers. Ana Iris doesn't think he'll leave me; she thinks he's too settled here, that we've been together too long. He's the sort of man who'll go to the airport but won't be able to get on board, she says. Ana Iris left her own children back on the Island, hasn't seen her three boys in nearly seven years. She understands what has to be sacrificed on a voyage.

In the bathroom I stare into my own eyes. His stubble quivers in beads of water, compass needles.

I work two blocks away, at St. Peter's Hospital. Never late. Never leave the laundry room. Never leave the heat. I load washers, I load dryers, peel the lint skin from the traps, measure out heaping scoops of crystal detergent. I'm in charge of four other workers, I make an American wage, but it's a donkey job. I sort through piles of sheets with gloved hands. The dirties are brought down by orderlies, morenas mostly. I never see the sick; they visit me through the stains and marks they leave on the sheets. A lot of the time the stains are too deep and I have to throw these linens in the special hamper. One of the girls from Baitoa tells me she's heard that everything in the hamper gets incinerated. Because of the SIDA, she whispers. Sometimes the stains are rusty and old and sometimes the blood smells sharp. You'd think, given the blood we see, that there's a great war going on out in the world. Just the one inside of bodies, the girl says.

My girls are not exactly reliable, but I enjoy working with them. They play music, they feud, they tell me funny stories. And because I don't yell or bully them they like me. They're young, sent to the States by their parents. The same age I was when I arrived; they see me now, twenty-eight, five years here, as a veteran, a rock, but back then, in those first days, I was so alone that every day was like eating my own heart.

A few of the girls have boyfriends and they're the ones I'm careful about depending on. They show up late or miss weeks at a time; they move to Nueva York or Union City without warning. When that happens I have to go to the manager's office. He's a little man, a thin man; has no hair on his face, but a thatch grows on his chest and up his neck. I tell him what happened and he pulls the girl's application and rips it in half, the cleanest of sounds. In less than an hour one of the other girls has sent a friend to me for an application.

The newest girl's called Samantha and she's a problem. She's dark and has a mouth like glass. Walked onto the job after one of the other girls ran off to Delaware. She's been in the States only six weeks and can't believe the cold. Twice she's tipped over the detergent barrels and she has a bad habit of working without gloves. She tells me that she's been sick, that she's had to move twice, that her housemates stole her money. She has the thin, intense look of the unlucky. Work is work, I tell her, but I loan her enough for her lunches, let her do personal laundry in our machines.

Does it get any better? I hear her ask the others. Just worse, they say. Wait for the freezing rain. She looks over at me, half smiling, uncertain. She's fifteen, maybe, and too thin to have mothered a child, but she's already shown me the pictures of her fat boy, Manolo. She's waiting for me to answer, but I turn to the next load. I've tried to explain to her the trick of working hard but she doesn't seem to care. She cracks her gum and smiles at me like I'm seventy. I unfold the next sheet and like a flower the bloodstain's there, no bigger than my hand. Hamper, I say, and Samantha throws it open. I ball the sheet up and toss. Slops right in, the loose ends dragged in by the center.

Nine hours of smoothing linen and I am home, eating cold yuca with hot oil, waiting for Tavito to come for me in the car he has borrowed. He is taking me to look at another house. It's been his dream since he first set foot in the States, and now, with all the jobs he's had and the money he's saved, it's possible. He's serious about it, which means I have to be serious about it, too. Each week we go out into the world and look. He makes an event out of it, dressing like he's interviewing for a better job, drives us out to the quiet sections of Livingston, where the trees have spread over roofs and garages. It's important, he says, to be careful, and I agree. He takes me with him whenever he can, but even I can tell that I'm not much help. I'm not one for change, I tell him, and I see only what's wrong with the places he wants, and later, in the car, he accuses me of sabotaging his dream.

Tonight we're supposed to see another. He walks into the kitchen clapping his chapped hands, but I'm in no mood and he can tell. He sits down next to me. Puts his hand on my knee. You're not going?

I'm sick.

How sick?

Bad enough.

He rubs at his stubble. What if I find the place? You want me to make the decision myself?

I don't think it will happen.

And if it does?

Then you'll surprise me.

He frowns. He checks the clock. He leaves.

Ana Iris is working her second job, so I spend my evening alone, listening to this whole country going cold on the radio. I try to keep still, but by nine I have the things he stores in my closet spread before me, the things he tells me never to touch. His books and some of his clothes, an old pair of glasses in a cardboard case, and two beaten chancletas. Hundreds of dead lottery tickets, crimped together in thick wads that fall apart at the touch. Dozens of baseball cards, Dominican players, Guzmán, Fernández, the Alous, swatting balls, winding up and fielding hard line drives just beyond the baseline. He has left me some of his dirties to wash, but I haven't had the time, and tonight I lay them out, the yeast still strong on the cuffs of his pants and work shirts.

In a box on the top shelf of the closet he has a stack of Amparo's letters, cinched in a fat brown rubber band. Nearly eight years' worth. Each envelope is worn and frail and I think he's forgotten they're here. I found them a month after he stored his things, right at the start of our relationship, couldn't resist, and afterward I wished I had.

He claims that he stopped writing to her the year before, but that's not true. Every month I drop by his apartment with his laundry and read the new letters she has sent, the ones he stashes under his bed. I know Amparo's name, her address, I know she works at a chocolate factory; I know that he hasn't told her about me.

The letters have grown beautiful over the years and now the handwriting has changed as well—each letter loops down, drooping into the next line like a rudder. *Please, please, mi querido husband, tell me what it is. How long did it take before your wife stopped mattering?*

After reading her letters I always feel better. I don't think this says good things about me.

WE are not here for fun, Ana Iris told me the day we met, and I said, Yes, you're right, even though I did not want to admit it.

Today I say these same things to Samantha and she looks at me with hatred. This morning when I arrived at the job I found her in the bathroom crying and I wish I could let her rest for an hour but we don't have those kinds of bosses. I put her on the folding and now her hands are shaking and she looks like she's going to cry again. I watch her for a long time and then I ask her what's wrong and she says, What isn't wrong?

"Here it is—the plain, unvarnished truth. Varnish it."

This, Ana Iris said, is not an easy country. A lot of girls don't make it through their first year.

You need to concentrate on work, I tell Samantha. It helps.

She nods, her little girl's face vacant. It is probably her son she misses, or the father. I squeeze her arm and go upstairs to report in and when I come back she's gone. The other girls pretend not to notice. I check the bathroom, find a bunch of crumpled-up paper towels on the floor. I smooth them out and put them on the edge of the sink.

Even after lunch I keep expecting her to walk in and say, Here I am. I just went for a stroll.

The truth is I am lucky to have a friend like Ana Iris. Most of the people I know in the States have no friends here; they're crowded together in apartments. They're cold, they're lonely. I've seen the lines at the phone places, the men who sell stolen card numbers, the cuartos they carry in their pockets.

When I first reached the States I was like that, alone, living over a bar with nine other women. At night no one could go to bed because of the screams and the exploding bottles from downstairs. Most of my housemates were fighting with each other over who owed who what or who had stolen money. When I myself had extra I went to the phones and called my mother, just so I could hear the voices of the people in my barrio as they passed the phone from hand to hand, like I was good luck. I was working for Tavito at that time; we weren't going out yet—that wouldn't happen for another two years. He had a housekeeping guiso then, mostly in Piscataway. The day we met he asked me which team I supported. Águilas, I told him, not really caring.

Licey, he boomed. The only real team on the Island.

That was the same voice he used to tell me to swab a toilet or scrub an oven. I didn't like him too much then; he was too arrogant and too loud and I took to humming when I heard him discussing fees with the owners of the houses.

My first few months were housecleaning and listening to Tavito argue. My first few months were taking long walks through the city and waiting for Sunday to call my mother. During the day I stood in front of mirrors in those great houses and told myself that I'd done well and afterward I would come home and fold up in front of the small television we crowded around and I believed this was enough.

I met Ana Iris after Tavito's business failed. Not enough ricos around here, he said without discouragement. Some friends set up the meeting and I met her at the fish market. Ana Iris was cutting and preparing fish as we spoke. I thought she was a boricua, but later she told me she was half and half. She had fast, accurate hands and her fillets were not ragged as were some of the others on the bed of crushed ice. Can you work at a hospital? she wanted to know.

I can do anything, I said.

There'll be blood.

If you can do that, I can work in a hospital.

She was the one who took the first pictures that I mailed home, weak fotos of me grinning, well dressed and uncertain. One in front of the McDonald's, because I knew my mother would appreciate how American it was. Another one in a bookstore. I'm pretending to read, even though the book is in English. My hair is pinned up and the skin behind my ears looks pale and underused. I'm so skinny I look sick. The best picture is of me in front of a building at the university. There are no students but hundreds of metal folding chairs have been arranged in front of the building for an event and I'm facing those chairs and they're facing me and in the light my hands are startling on the blue fabric of my dress.

"So that's how he's able to crank the stuff out."

THREE nights a week we look at houses. Few people will sell to us. They treat us well enough in person but in the end we never hear from them, and the next time Tavito drives by the house people are living there, usually blanquitos, tending the lawn that should have been ours, scaring crows out of our mulberry trees. Today a grandfather, with red tints in his gray hair, tells us he likes us. The house is beautiful and we're both nervous. Tavito stalks about like a cat searching for a place to whelp. He steps into closets and has me roll the doors shut on him. He bangs against walls and spends close to five minutes running his finger around the basement's wet seams. He smells the air for a hint of mold. In the bathroom I flush the toilet while he holds his hand under the full torrent of the shower. We both search the kitchen cabinets for roaches. In the next room the grandfather calls our references and laughs at something somebody has said.

He hangs up and says something to Tavito that I don't understand. With these people I cannot even rely on their voices. The blancos will call your mother a puta in the same voice they greet you with. I wait without hoping until Tavito leans close and tells me it looks good.

That's great, I say, still sure Tavito will change his mind. He trusts very little. Out in the car he starts in, certain the old man is trying to trick him.

Why? Did you see anything wrong?

They make it look good. That's part of the trick. You watch, in two weeks everything will start falling apart.

Won't he fix things?

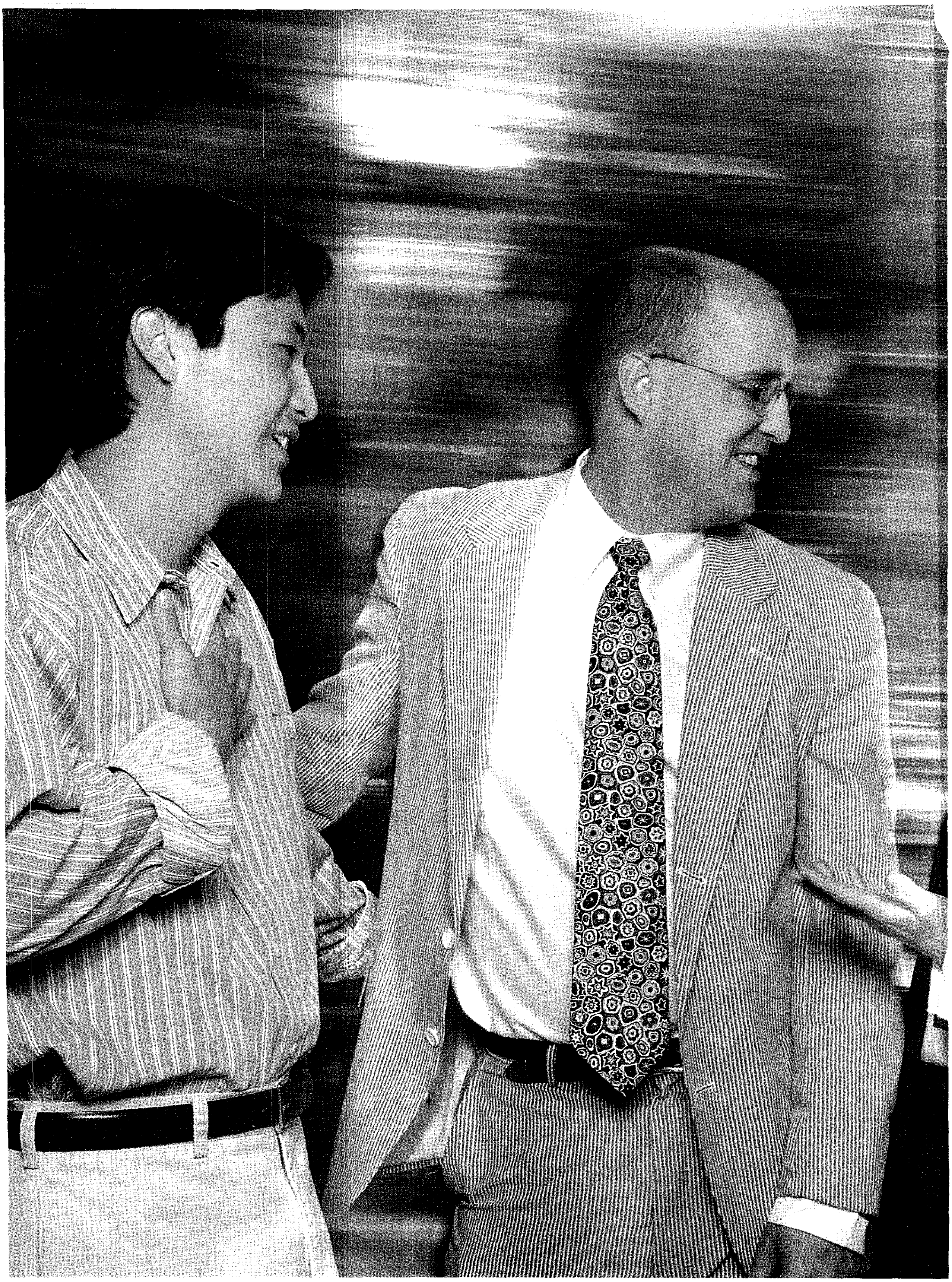
He says he will, but would you trust an old man like that? I'm surprised that viejo can still get around.

We say nothing more. He screws his head down into his shoulder and the cords in his neck pop out. I know he will yell if I talk. He stops at the house, the tires sliding on the snow.

Do you work tonight? I ask.

Of course I do.

He settles back into the Buick, tired. The windshield is streaked and sooty and the margins that the wipers cannot reach have a crust of dirt on them. We watch two kids pound a third with snowballs



Left to right: Chang-rae Lee, Tony Earley, A. M. Homes, and Matthew Klam. Photograph by Chris Callis.

and I feel Tavito sadden and I know he's thinking about his son and right then I want to put my arm around him, tell him it will be fine.

Will you be coming by?

Depends on how the work goes.

O.K., I say.

My housemates trade phony smiles over the greasy tablecloth when I tell them about the house. Sounds like you're going to be bien cómoda, Marisol says. No worries for you.

None at all. You should be proud.

Yes, I say.

Later I lie in bed and listen to the trucks outside, their beds rattling with salt and sand. In the middle of the night I wake up and realize that he has not returned but not until morning am I angry. Ana Iris's bed is made, the netting folded neatly at its foot, a gauze. I hear her gargling in the bathroom. My hands and feet are blue from the cold and I cannot see through the window for the frost and icicles. When Ana Iris starts praying, I say, Please, just not today. She lowers her hands. I dress.

HE'S talking about the man who fell from the rafters. What would you do if that was me? he asks again. And this time I answer.

I would find another man, I tell him.

He smiles. Would *you*? Where would you find one?

You have friends, don't you?

What man would touch a dead man's novia?

I don't know, I said. I wouldn't have to tell anyone. I could find a man the way I found you.

They would be able to tell. Even the most tonto would see the death in your eyes.

A person doesn't mourn forever.

Some do. He kisses me. I bet you would. I am a hard man to replace. They tell me so at work.

How long did you mourn for your son?

He stops kissing me. Enriquillo. I mourned him a long time. I am still missing him.

I couldn't tell that by looking at you.

You don't look carefully enough.

It doesn't show, I don't think.

He puts his hand down at his side. You are not a clever woman.

I'm just saying it doesn't show.

I can see that now, he says. You are not a clever woman.

While he sits by the window and smokes I pull the last letter his wife wrote him out of my purse and open it in front of him. He doesn't know how brazen I can be. One sheet, smelling of violet water. *Please*, Amparo has written neatly in the center of the page. That's all. I smile at Tavito and place the letter back in the envelope.

Ana Iris once asked me if I loved him and I told her about the lights in my old home in the capital, how they flickered and you never knew if they would go out or not. You put down your things and you waited and couldn't do anything really until the lights decided. This, I told her, is how I feel.

I HOLD up the blue hospital sheets in front of me and close my eyes, but the bloodstains float in the darkness in front of me. Can we save this one with bleach? Samantha asks. She is back, but I don't know for how much longer. In the bag at my feet I have his clothes and I wash them all together with the hospital things. For a day he will smell of my job, but I know that bread is stronger than blood.

I have not stopped watching for signs that he misses her. You must not think on these things, Ana Iris tells me. Keep them out of your mind. You do not want to go crazy from them.

This is how Ana Iris survives here, how she keeps from losing her mind over her children. I've seen a picture of her three sons, three little boys tumbled out in the Jardín Japonés, near a pine tree, smiling, the smallest a saffron blur trying to shy away from the camera. I listen to her advice and on my way to and from work I concentrate on the other sleepwalkers around me, the men who sweep the streets and those who stand around in the backs of restaurants, with uncut hair, smoking cigarettes; the people in suits who stumble from the trains—a good many will stop at a lover's and that is all they will think about while they're eating their cold meals at home, while they're in bed with their spouses. I think of my mother, who kept with a married man when I was seven, a man with a handsome beard and craggy cheeks, who was so black that he was called Noche by everyone who knew him. He worked stringing wires for Codetel out in the campo but he lived in our barrio and had two children with a woman he had married in Pedernales. His wife was very pretty, and when I think of Tavito's wife I see her, in heels, flashing yards of brown leg, a woman warmer than the air around her. Una jeva buena. I do not imagine Tavito's wife as uneducated. She watches the telenovelas simply to pass the time. In her letters she mentions a child she tends who she loves almost as much as she had loved her own. In the beginning, when Tavito had not been gone long, she believed they could have another son, one like this Victor, her amorcito. *He plays baseball like you*, Amparo wrote. She never mentions Enriquillo.

SOMETIMES I can clearly see us in the future. I will cook for him and when he leaves food out on the counter I will call him a zángano. I can see myself watching him shave every morning. And at other times I am terrified that one bright autumn day (or a day like this, so cold your mind shifts every time the wind does) he will wake up and decide it's all wrong. He will wash his face and then turn to me. I'm sorry, he'll say. I have to leave now.

The next day Samantha is sick with the flu; I feel like I'm dying, she says, and the day after I have it, too. I pass it to Tavito; he calls me estúpida for doing so and he avoids me for the rest of the week. He calls on Friday to update me on the house. The old man wants to sell to us, he says. I try to bring up Amparo but he kills it, like always.

I already told you it's over, he snaps. What else do you want? A maldito corpse?

That night Ana Iris and I go to a movie. We cannot understand the English but we both like the new theatre's clean rugs. Blue and pink neon strips zag across the walls like lightning. We buy a popcorn to share and smuggle in cans of tamarind juice from the bodega. The people around us talk; we talk as well.

You're lucky to be getting out, she says. Those putas are going to drive me crazy.

I'm going to miss you, I say, and she laughs.

You are on your way to another life. You won't have time to miss me.

Yes, I will. I'll probably be over to visit you every day.

You won't have the time.

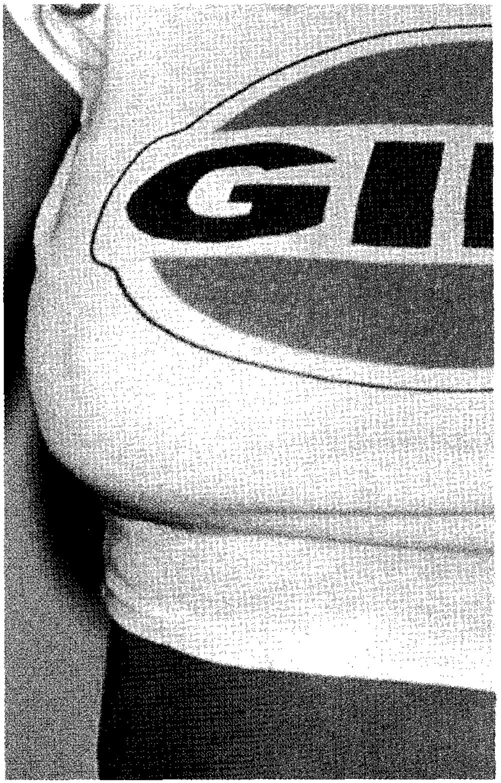
I will if I make time. Are you trying to get rid of me?

Of course not, Yasmin. Don't be stupid.

We sit quietly for the rest of the movie. I have not asked her what she thinks of my move and she has not offered her opinion. We respect each other's silence about certain things, the way I never ask her if she ever intends to send

THE FAILURE

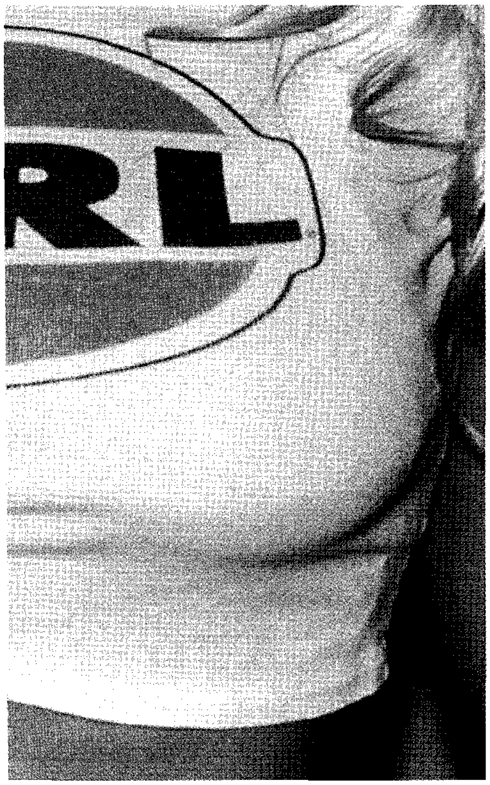
JONATHAN FRANZEN



FRANK TRAPPER/SYGMA

DOWN the long concourse they came unsteadily, Enid favoring her damaged hip, Alfred paddling at the air with loose-hinged hands and slapping the airport carpeting with poorly controlled feet, both of them carrying Nordic Pleasurelines shoulder bags and concentrating on the floor in front of them, measuring out the hazardous distance three paces at a time. To anyone who saw them averting their eyes from the dark-haired New Yorkers careening past them, to anyone who caught a glimpse of Alfred's straw fedora looming at the height of Iowa corn on Labor Day, or the yellow wool of the slacks stretching over Enid's outslung hip, it was obvious that they were Midwestern and intimidated. But to Chip Lambert, who was waiting for them just beyond the security checkpoint, they were killers.

Chip had crossed his arms defensively and raised one hand to pull on the stainless-steel rivet in his ear. He worried that he might tear the rivet right out of his earlobe—that the maximum pain his ear's nerves could generate was less pain than he needed now to steady himself. From his station by the metal detectors he watched an azure-haired girl overtake his parents, an azure-haired girl of college age, a very wantable stranger with pierced lips and eyebrows. It struck him that if he could have sex with this girl for one second he could face his parents confidently, and that if he could keep on having sex with this girl once every minute for as long as his parents were in town he could survive their entire visit. Chip was a tall, gym-built man with crow's-feet and sparse butter-yellow hair; if the girl had noticed him, she might have thought he was a little too old for the leather he was wearing. As she hurried past him, he pulled harder on his rivet to offset the pain of her departure from his life forever and to focus his attention on his father, whose face was brightening at the discovery of a son among so many strangers. In the lunging manner of a man floundering in water, Alfred fell upon Chip and grabbed Chip's hand and wrist as if they were a rope he'd been thrown. "Well!" he said. "Well!" ♦



The five excerpted stories in this issue, including "The Failure," will appear in their entirety in the next five issues.

for her children. I cannot tell what she will do. She has had men and they, too, have slept in our room, but she never kept any for long. When I first told her we were getting the house she said she hoped that I would be happy and I said I would.

We walk back from the theatre close together, careful of the shiny ice that scars the snow. The neighborhood is not safe. Boys who know only enough Spanish to curse stand together at the street corners and scowl. They cross into traffic without looking and when we pass them a fat one says, I eat pussy better than anybody in the world. Ana Iris puts her hand on me. We pass the old apartment where I used to live, the one over the bar, and I stare up at it, trying to remember which window I used to stare out of. Come on, Ana Iris says. It's freezing.

TAVITO must have told Amparo something, because the letters stop. I guess it's true what they say: if you wait long enough everything changes.

In December we move into our house. Next door lives a family of Cubans. Their last name is scripted on their mailbox in gold; each morning Don Marco scrapes at the paint with his thumb to make sure it is holding. I hear this wake-up sound in my dreams as clear as the birds outside my window.

The hospital builds another wing; three days after the cranes fold up and surround another building Samantha doesn't return to work. I ask around but no one knows. I don't remember her saying anything her last day. The girl who replaces her is quiet and fat and works without stopping or complaint. Sometimes, when I am in one of my moods, I imagine she ate Samantha and this is where her energy comes from, why she never seems to tire.

Some nights when Tavito is out with his friends I read the old letters and sip the rum we have under the kitchen sink.

I am pregnant when the next one finally arrives. Sent from Tavito's old place to our new home. I pull it from the stack and stare at it. My heart is beating like it's lonely, like there's nothing else inside of me. I want to open it but I call Ana Iris instead; we haven't talked in a long time. I stare out at the bird-filled hedges while the phone rings.

I want to go for a walk, I tell her.

The buds are breaking through the tips of the branches. When I step into the house she kisses me and sits me down at the kitchen table. Only two of the housemates I know; the rest have moved on or gone home. There are new girls from the Island. They shuffle in and out, barely look at me, exhausted by the promises they've made. I want to advise them: no promises can survive that sea. I am showing, and Ana Iris is thin and worn. Her hair has not been cut in months; the split ends rise out of her thick strands like a second head of hair. She can still smile, though. A woman is singing a bachata somewhere upstairs, and her voice in the air reminds me of the size of this house, how high the ceilings are.

Here, Ana Iris says, handing me a scarf. Let's go for a walk.

I hold the letter in my hands. The day is the color of pigeons. Our feet crush the bits of snow that lie scattered here and there, crusted over with gravel and dust. We wait for the mash of cars to slow at the light and then we scuttle into the park. Our first months Tavito and I were in this park daily. Just to wind down after work, he said, but I painted my fingernails red every time. I remember the day before we first made love, how I already knew it would happen. He had only just told me about his wife and about his son. We had met a group of boys playing baseball and he had bullied the bat from them, cut at the air with it, sent the boys out deep. I thought he would embarrass himself, so I stood back, ready to pat his arm when he fell or when the ball dropped at his feet, but he connected with a sharp crack of the aluminum bat and sent the ball out beyond the children with an easy motion of his upper body. The children threw their hands up and yelled and he smiled at me over their heads.

We walk the length of the park without talking and then we head back across the highway, toward downtown.

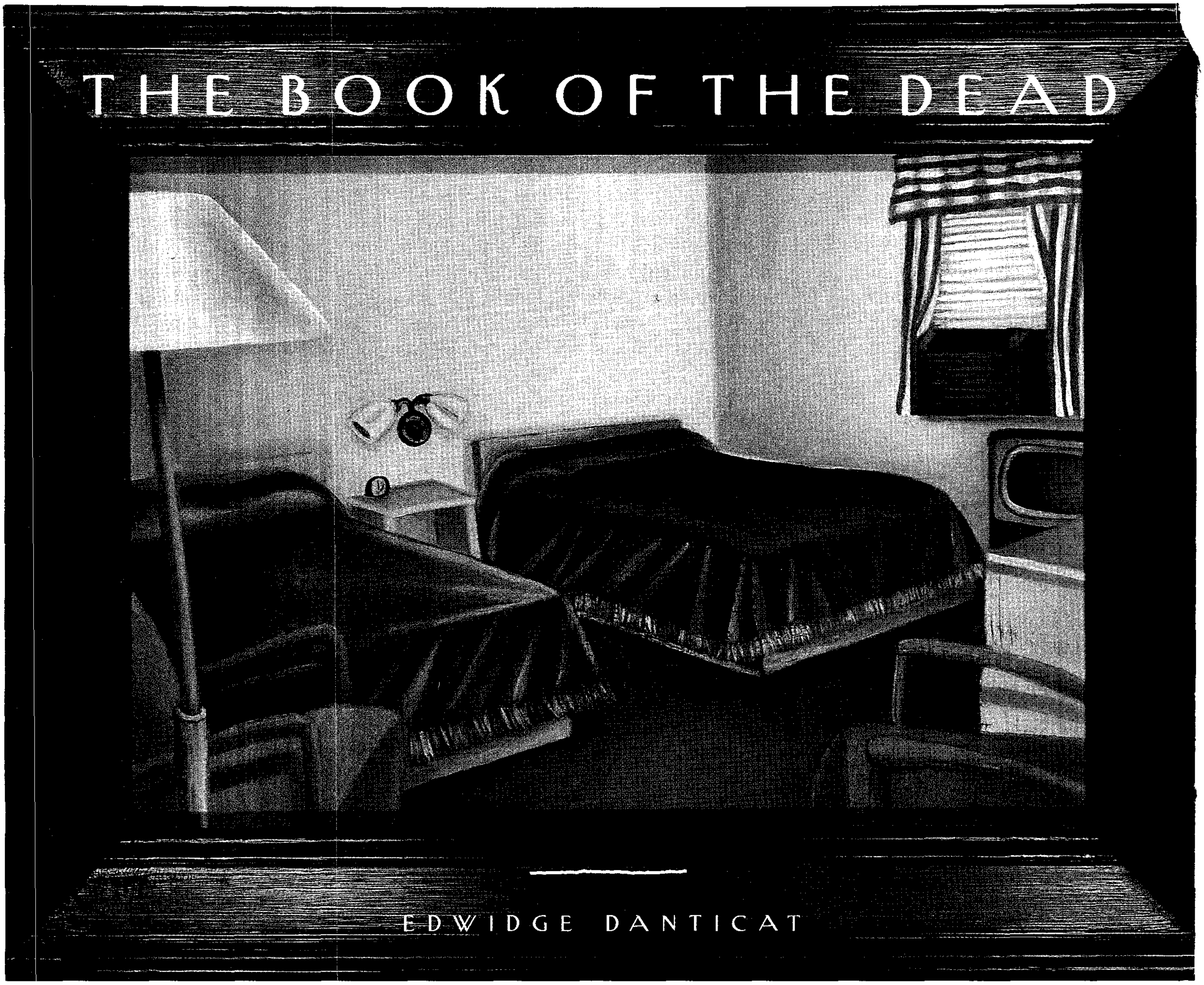
She's writing again, I say, but Ana Iris interrupts me.

I've been calling my babies, she says. She points out the man across from the courthouse, who sells her stolen calling-card numbers. They've gotten so much older, she tells me, that it's hard for me to recognize their voices.

We have to sit down after a while so that I can hold her hand and she can cry. I should say something but I don't know what there is to say.

It gets cold. We go home. That night I give Tavito the letter and close my eyes while he reads it. ♦

THE BOOK OF THE DEAD



EDWIDGE DANTICAT

My father is gone. I am slouched in a cast-aluminum chair across from two men, one the manager of the hotel where we're staying and the other a policeman. They are waiting for me to explain what has become of him, my father.

The manager—"Mr. Flavio Salinas," the plaque on his office door reads—has the most striking pair of chartreuse eyes I have ever seen on a man with an island-Spanish lilt to his voice.

The officer is a baby-faced, short white Floridian with a pot belly.

"Where are you and your daddy from, Ms. Bienaimé?" he asks.

I answer "Haiti," even though I was born and raised in East Flatbush, Brooklyn, and have never visited my parents' birthplace. I do this because it is one more thing I have longed to have in common with my parents.

The officer plows forward. "You down here in Lakeland from Haiti?"

"We live in New York. We were on our way to Tampa."

I find Manager Salinas's office gaudy. The walls are covered with orange-and-green wallpaper, briefly interrupted by a giant gold-leaf-bordered print of a Victorian cottage that somehow resembles the building we're in. Patting his light-green tie, he whispers reassuringly, "Officer Bo and I will do the best we can to help you find your father."

We start out with a brief description: "Sixty-four, five feet eight inches, two hundred and twenty pounds, moon-faced, with thinning salt-and-pepper hair. Velvet-brown eyes—"

"Velvet-brown?" says Officer Bo.

"Deep brown—same color as his complexion."

My father has had partial frontal dentures for ten years, since he fell off his and my mother's bed when his prison nightmares began. I mention that, too. Just the dentures, not the nightmares. I also bring up the claw-shaped marks that run from his left ear down along his cheek to the corner of his mouth—the only visible reminder of the year he spent at Fort Dimanche, the Port-au-Prince prison ironically named after the Lord's Day.

"Does your daddy have any kind of mental illness, senility?" asks Officer Bo.

"No."

"Do you have any pictures of your daddy?"

I feel like less of a daughter because I'm not carrying a photograph in my wallet. I had hoped to take some pictures of him on our trip. At one of the rest stops I bought a disposable camera and pointed it at my father. No, no, he had protested, covering his face with both hands like a little boy protecting his cheeks from a slap. He did not want

LISA KRIVACKA, "DOUBLE BEDS"/MARGARET BODELL GALLERY

any more pictures taken of him for the rest of his life. He was feeling too ugly.

"That's too bad," says Officer Bo. "Does he speak English, your daddy? He can ask for directions, et cetera?"

"Yes."

"Is there anything that might make your father run away from you—particularly here in Lakeland?" Manager Salinas interjects. "Did you two have a fight?"

I had never tried to tell my father's story in words before now, but my first sculpture of him was the reason for our trip: a two-foot-high mahogany figure of my father, naked, crouching on the floor, his back arched like the curve of a crescent moon, his downcast eyes fixed on his short stubby fingers and the wide palms of his hands. It was hardly revolutionary, minimalist at best, but it was my favorite of all my attempted representations of him. It was the way I had imagined him in prison.

THE last time I had seen my father? The previous night, before falling asleep. When we pulled into the pebbled driveway, densely lined with palm and banana trees, it was almost midnight. All the restaurants in the area were closed. There was nothing to do but shower and go to bed.

"It is like a paradise here," my father said when he saw the room. It had the same orange-and-green wallpaper as Salinas's office, and the plush green carpet matched the walls. "Look, Annie," he said, "it is like grass under our feet." He was always searching for a glimpse of paradise, my father.

He picked the bed closest to the bathroom, removed the top of his gray jogging suit, and unpacked his toiletries. Soon after, I heard him humming, as he always did, in the shower.

After he got into bed, I took a bath, pulled my hair back in a ponytail, and checked on the sculpture—just felt it a little bit through the bubble padding and carton wrapping to make sure it wasn't broken. Then I slipped under the covers, closed my eyes, and tried to sleep.

I pictured the client to whom I was delivering the sculpture: Gabrielle Fonteneau, a young woman about my age, an actress on a nationally syndicated television series. My friend Jonas, the principal at the East Flatbush elementary school where I teach drawing to fifth graders, had shown her a picture of my "Father" sculpture, and, the way Jonas told it, Gabrielle Fonteneau had fallen in love with it and wished to offer it as a gift to her father on his birthday.

Since this was my first big sale, I wanted to make sure that the piece got there safely. Besides, I needed a weekend away, and both my mother and I figured that my father, who watched a lot of television, both in his barbershop and at home, would enjoy meeting Gabrielle, too. But when I woke up the next morning my father was gone.

I showered, put on my driving jeans and a T-shirt, and waited. I watched a half hour of midmorning local news, smoked three mentholated cigarettes even though we were in a nonsmoking room, and waited some more. By noon, four hours had gone by. And it was only then that I noticed that the car was still there but the sculpture was gone.

I decided to start looking for my father: in the east garden, the west garden, the dining room, the exercise room, and in the few guest rooms cracked open while the maid changed the sheets; in the little convenience store at the Amoco gas station nearby; even in the Salvation Army thrift shop that from a distance seemed to blend into the interstate. All that waiting and looking actually took six hours, and I felt guilty for having held back so long before going to the front desk to ask, "Have you seen my father?"

I FEEL Officer Bo's fingers gently stroking my wrist. Up close he smells like fried eggs and gasoline, like breakfast at the Amoco. "I'll put the word out with the other boys," he says. "Salinas here will be in his office. Why don't you go back to your room in case he shows up there?"

I return to the room and lie in the unmade bed, jumping up when I hear the click from the electronic key in the door. It's only the housekeeper. I turn down the late-afternoon cleaning and call my mother at the beauty salon where she perms, presses, and braids hair, next door to my father's barbershop. But she isn't there. So I call my parents' house and leave the hotel number on their machine. "Please call me as soon as you can, Manman. It's about Papi."

Once, when I was twelve, I overheard my mother telling a young woman who was about to get married how she and my father had first met on the sidewalk in front of Fort Dimanche the evening that my father was released from jail. (At a dance, my father had fought with a soldier out of uniform who had him arrested and thrown in prison for a year.) That night, my mother was returning home from a sewing class when he stumbled out of the prison gates and collapsed into her arms, his face still bleeding from his last beating. They married and left for New York a year later. "We were like two seeds planted in a rock," my mother had told the young woman, "but somehow when our daughter, Annie, came we took root."

MY mother soon calls me back, her voice staccato with worry.

"Where is Papi?"

"I lost him."

"How you lost him?"

"He got up before I did and disappeared."

"How long he been gone?"

"Eight hours," I say, almost not believing myself that it's been that long.

My mother is clicking her tongue and humming. I can see her sitting at the kitchen table, her eyes closed, her fingers sliding up and down her flesh-colored stockinged legs.

"You call police?"

"Yes."

"What they say?"

"To wait, that he'll come back."

My mother is thumping her fingers against the phone's mouthpiece, which is giving me a slight ache in my right ear.

"Tell me where you are," she says. "Two more hours and he's not there, call me, I come."

I dial Gabrielle Fonteneau's cellular-phone number. When she answers, her voice sounds just as it does on television, but more silken and seductive without the sitcom laugh track.

"To think," my father once said while watching her show, "Haitian-born actresses on American television."

"And one of them wants to buy my stuff," I'd added.

When she speaks, Gabrielle Fonteneau sounds as if she's in a place with cicadas, waterfalls, palm trees, and citronella candles to keep the mosquitoes away. I realize that I, too, am in such a place, but I can't appreciate it.

"So nice of you to come all this way to deliver the sculpture," she says. "Jonas tell you why I like it so much? My papa was a journalist in Port-au-Prince. In 1975, he wrote a story criticizing the dictatorship, and he was arrested and put in jail."

"Fort Dimanche?"

"No, another one," she says. "Caserne. Papa kept track of days there by scraping lines with his fingernails on the walls of his cell. One of the guards didn't like this, so he pulled out all his fingernails with pliers."

I think of the photo spread I saw in the *Haitian Times* of Gabrielle Fonteneau and her parents in their living room in Tampa. Her father was described as a lawyer, his daughter's manager; her mother a court stenographer. There was no hint in that photograph of what had once happened to the father. Perhaps people don't see anything in my father's face, either, in spite of his scars.

"We celebrate his birthday on the day he was released from prison," she says. "It's the hands I love so much in your sculpture. They're so strong."

I am drifting away from Gabrielle Fonteneau when I hear her say, "So when will you get here? You have instructions from Jonas, right? Maybe we can make you lunch. My mother makes great *lanbi*."

"I'll be there at twelve tomorrow," I say. "My father is with me. We are making a little weekend vacation of this."

MY father loves museums. When he isn't working in his barbershop, he's often at the Brooklyn Museum. The ancient Egyptian rooms are his favorites.

"Is there anyone else in bookkeeping who would like one last picture with Mr. Pinkston?"

"The Egyptians, they was like us," he likes to say. The Egyptians worshipped their gods in many forms and were often ruled by foreigners. The pharaohs were like the dictators he had fled. But what he admires most about the Egyptians is the way they mourned.

"Yes, they grieve," he'll say. He marvels at the mummification that went on for weeks, resulting in bodies that survived thousands of years.

My whole adult life, I have struggled to find the proper manner of sculpting my father, a man who learned about art by standing with me most of the Saturday mornings of my childhood, mesmerized by the golden masks, the shawabtis, and Osiris, ruler of the underworld.

WHEN my father finally appears in the hotel-room doorway, I am awed by him. Smiling, he looks like a much younger man, further bronzed after a long day at the beach.

"Annie, let your father talk to you." He walks over to my bed, bends down to unlace his sneakers. "*On ti koze*, a little chat."

"Where were you? Where is the sculpture, Papi?" I feel my eyes twitching, a nervous reaction I inherited from my mother.

"That's why we need to chat," he says. "I have objections with your statue."

He pulls off his sneakers and rubs his feet with both hands.

"I don't want you to sell that statue," he says. Then he picks up the phone and calls my mother.

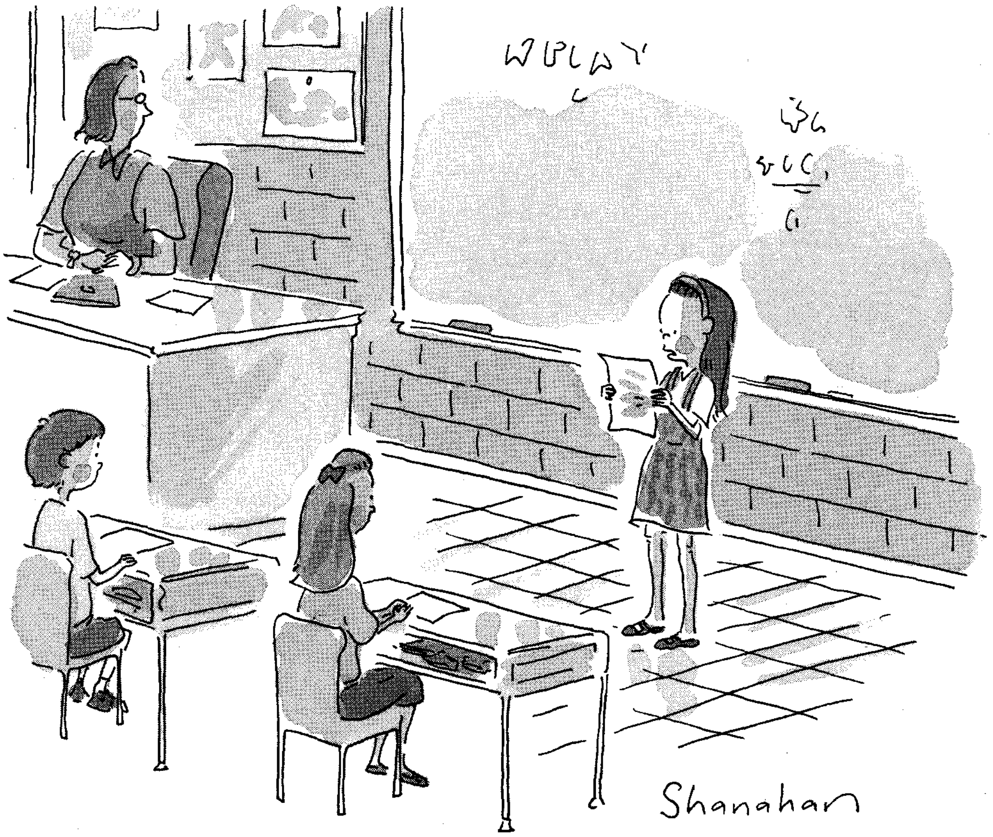
"I know she called you," he says to her in Creole. "Her head is so hot. She panics so easily. I was just out walking, thinking."

I hear my mother lovingly scolding him and telling him not to leave me again. When he hangs up the phone, he picks up his sneakers and puts them back on.

"Where is the sculpture?" My eyes are twitching so hard now that I can barely see.

"Let us go," he says. "I will take you to it."

As my father maneuvers the car out of the parking lot, I tell myself he might be ill, mentally ill, even though I have never detected anything wrong beyond his prison nightmares. I am trying to piece it together, this sudden yet familiar picture of a parent's vulnerability. When I was ten years old and my father had the chicken pox, I overheard him say to a friend on the phone, "The doctor tells me that at my age chicken pox can kill a man." This was the first time I realized that my father could die. I looked up the word "kill" in every dictionary and encyclopedia at school, trying to comprehend what it meant, that my father could be eradicated from my life.



"And I'd recommend this book to anyone in the market for a free plush toy."

• •

My father stops the car on the side of the highway near a manmade lake, one of those artificial creations of the modern tropical city, with curved stone benches surrounding stagnant water. There is little light to see by except a half-moon. He heads toward one of the benches, and I sit down next to him, letting my hands dangle between my legs.

"Is this where the sculpture is?" I ask.

"In the water," he says.

"O.K.," I say. "But please know this about yourself. You are an especially harsh critic."

My father tries to smother a smile.

"Why?" I ask.

He scratches his chin. Anger is a wasted emotion, I've always thought. My parents got angry at unfair politics in New York or Port-au-Prince, but they never got angry at my grades—at all the B's I got in everything but art classes—or at my not eating vegetables or occasionally vomiting my daily spoonful of cod-liver oil. Ordinary anger, I thought, was a weakness. But now I am angry. I want to hit my father, beat the craziness out of his head.

"Annie," he says. "When I first saw your statue, I wanted to be buried with it, to take it with me into the other world."

"Like the ancient Egyptians," I say.

He smiles, grateful, I think, that I still recall his passions.

"Annie," he asks, "do you remember when I read to you from 'The Book of the Dead'?"

"Are you dying?" I say to my father. "Because I can only forgive you for this if you are. You can't take this back."

He is silent for a moment too long.

I think I hear crickets, though I cannot imagine where they might be. There is the highway, the cars racing by, the half-moon, the lake dug up from the depths of the ground, the allée of royal palms beyond. And there is me and my father.

"You remember the judgment of the dead," my father says, "when the heart of a person is put on a scale. If it is heavy, then this person cannot enter the other world."

It is a testament to my upbringing that I am not yelling at him.

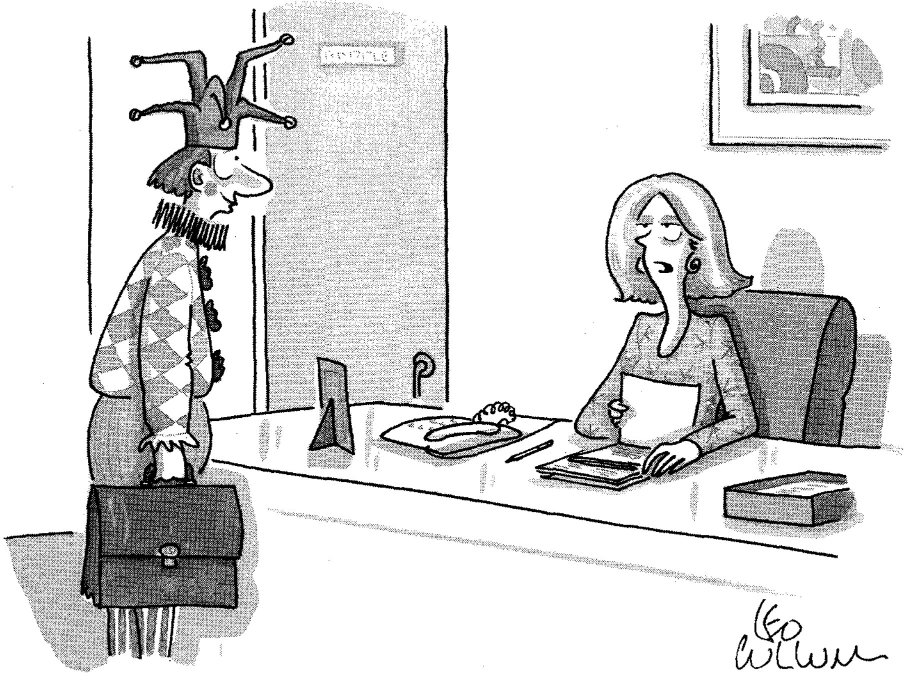
"I don't deserve a statue," he says, even while looking like one: the Madonna of Humility, for example, contemplating her losses in the dust.

"Annie, your father was the hunter," he says. "He was not the prey."

"What are you saying?" I ask.

"We have a proverb," he says. " 'One day for the hunter, one day for the prey.' Your father was the hunter. He was not the prey." Each word is hard-won as it leaves my father's mouth, balanced like those hearts on the Egyptian scale.

"Annie, when I saw your mother the first time, I was not just out of prison. I was a guard in the prison. One of the prisoners I was questioning had scratched me with a piece of tin. I went out to the street in a rage, blood all over my face. I was about to go back and do something bad, very bad. But instead comes your mother. I smash into her, and she asks me what I am doing there. I told her I was just let go



"You may rush in."

• •

from prison and she held my face and cried in my hair."

"And the nightmares, what are they?"

"Of what I, your father, did to others."

"Does Manman know?"

"I told her, Annie, before we married."

I am the one who drives back to the hotel. In the car, he says, "Annie, I am still your father, still your mother's husband. I would not do these things now."

When we get back to the hotel room, I leave a message for Officer Bo, and another for Manager Salinas, telling them that I have found my father. He has slipped into the bathroom, and now he runs the shower at full force. When it seems that he is never coming out, I call my mother at home in Brooklyn.

"How do you love him?" I whisper into the phone.

My mother is tapping her fingers against the mouthpiece.

"I don't know, Annie," she whispers back, as though there is a chance that she might also be overheard by him. "I feel only that you and me, we saved him. When I met him, it made him stop hurting the people. This is how I see it. He was a seed thrown into a rock, and you and me, Annie, we helped push a flower out of a rock."

WHEN I get up the next morning, my father is already dressed. He is sitting on the edge of his bed with his back to me, his head bowed, his face buried in his hands. If I were sculpting him, I would make him a praying mantis, crouching motionless, seeming to pray while waiting to strike.

With his back still turned, my father says, "Will you call those people and tell them you have it no more, the statue?"

"We were invited to lunch there. I believe we should go."

He raises his shoulders and shrugs. It is up to me.

THE drive to Gabrielle Fonteneau's house seems longer than the twenty-four hours it took to drive from New York: the ocean, the palms along the road, the highway so imposingly neat. My father fills in the silence in the car by saying, "So now you know, Annie, why your mother and me, we have never returned home."

The Fonteneaus' house is made of bricks of white coral, on a cul-de-sac with a row of banyans separating the two sides of the street.

Silently, we get out of the car and follow a concrete path to the front door. Before we can knock, an older woman walks out. Like Gabrielle, she has stunning midnight-black eyes and skin the color of sorrel, with spiralling curls brushing the sides of her face. When Gabrielle's father joins her, I realize where Gabrielle Fonteneau gets her height. He is more than six feet tall.

Mr. Fonteneau extends his hands, first to my father and then to me. They're large, twice the size of my father's. The fingernails have grown back, thick, densely dark, as though the past had nestled itself there in black ink.

We move slowly through the living room, which has a cathedral ceiling and walls covered with Haitian paintings—Obin, Hyppolite, Tiga, Duval-Carrié. Out on the back terrace, which towers over a nursery of orchids and red dracaenas, a table is set for lunch.

Mr. Fonteneau asks my father where his family is from in Haiti, and my father lies. In the past, I thought he always said a different province because he had lived in all those places, but I realize now that he says this to keep anyone from tracing him, even though twenty-six years and eighty more pounds shield him from the threat of immediate recognition.

When Gabrielle Fonteneau makes her entrance, in an off-the-shoulder ruby dress, my father and I stand up.

"Gabrielle," she says, when she shakes hands with my father, who blurts out spontaneously, "You are one of the flowers of Haiti."

Gabrielle Fonteneau tilts her head coyly.

"We eat now," Mrs. Fonteneau announces, leading me and my father to a bathroom to wash up before the meal. Standing before a pink seashell-shaped sink, my father and I dip our hands under the faucet flow.

"Annie," my father says, "we always thought, your mother and me, that children could raise their parents higher. Look at what this girl has done for her parents."

During the meal of conch, plantains, and mushroom rice, Mr. Fonteneau tries to draw my father into conversation. He asks when my father was last in Haiti.

"Twenty-six years," my father replies.

"No going back for you?" asks Mrs. Fonteneau.

"I have not had the opportunity," my father says.

"We go back every year to a beautiful place overlooking the ocean in the mountains in Jacmel," says Mrs. Fonteneau.

"Have you ever been to Jacmel?" Gabrielle Fonteneau asks me.

I shake my head no.

"We are fortunate," Mrs. Fonteneau says, "that we have another place to go where we can say our rain is sweeter, our dust is lighter, our beach is prettier."

"So now we are tasting rain and weighing dust," Mr. Fonteneau says, and laughs.

"There is nothing like drinking the sweet juice from a green coconut you fetched yourself from your own tree, or sinking your hand in sand from the beach in your own country," Mrs. Fonteneau says.

"When did you ever climb a coconut tree?" Mr. Fonteneau says, teasing his wife.

I am imagining what my father's nightmares might be. Maybe he dreams of dipping his hands in the sand on a beach in his own country and finds that what he comes up with is a fist full of blood.

AFTER lunch, my father asks if he can have a closer look at the Fonteneaus' back-yard garden. While he's taking the tour, I confess to Gabrielle Fonteneau that I don't have the sculpture.

"My father threw it away," I say.

Gabrielle Fonteneau frowns.

"I don't know," she says. "Was there even a sculpture at all? I trust Jonas, but maybe you fooled him, too. Is this some scam, to get into our home?"

"There was a sculpture," I say. "Jonas will tell you that. My father just didn't like it, so he threw it away."

She raises her perfectly arched eyebrows, perhaps out of concern for my father's sanity or my own.

"I'm really disappointed," she says. "I wanted it for a reason. My father goes home when he looks at a piece of art. He goes home deep inside himself. For a long time, he used to hide his fingers from people. It's like he was making a fist all the time. I wanted to give him this thing so that he knows we understand what happened to him."

"I am truly sorry," I say.

Over her shoulders, I see her parents guiding my father through rows of lemongrass. I want to promise her that I will make her another sculpture, one especially modelled on her father. But I don't know when I will be able to work on anything again. I have lost my subject, the father I loved as well as pitied.

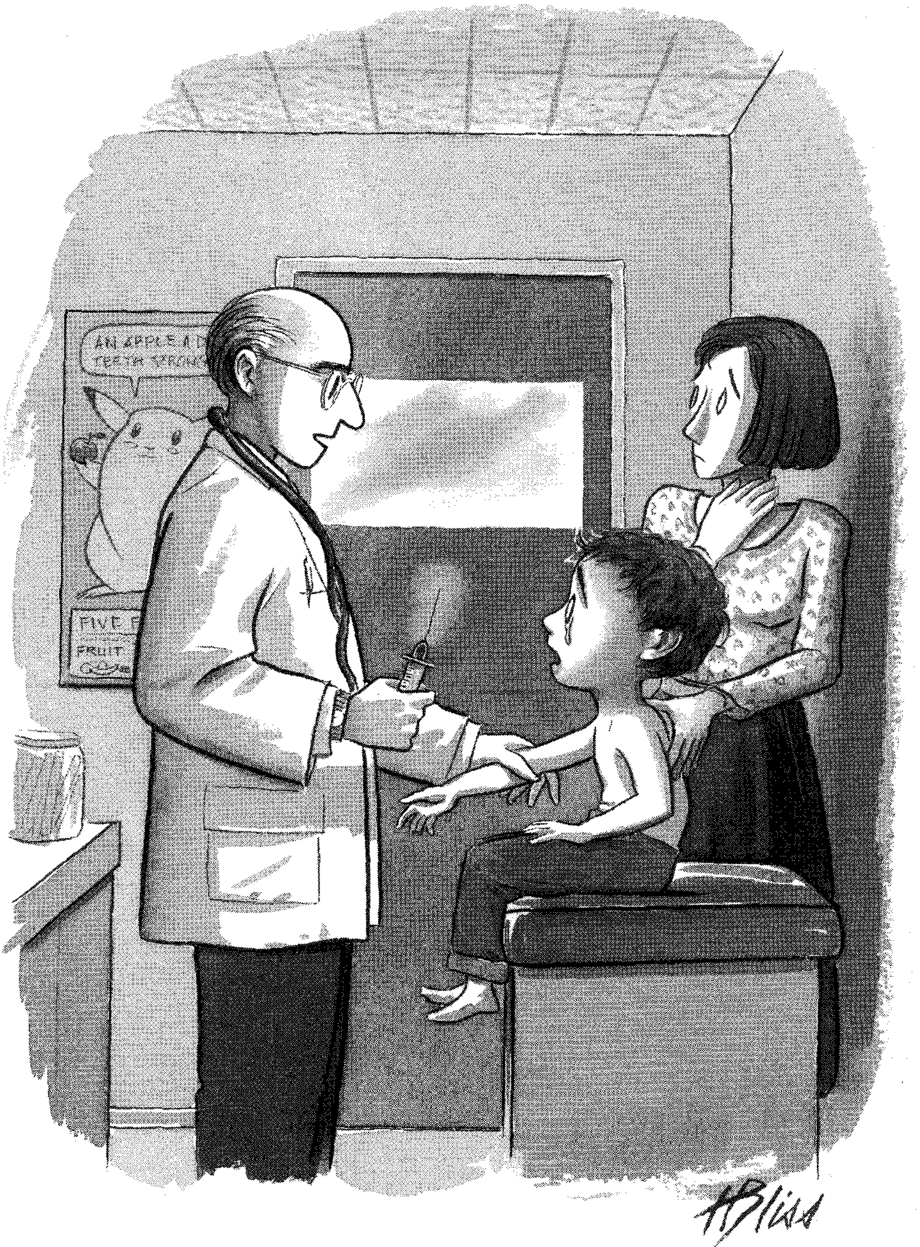
In the garden, I watch my father snap a white orchid from its stem and hold it out toward Mrs. Fonteneau, who accepts it with a nod of thanks.

"I don't understand," Gabrielle Fonteneau says. "You did all this for nothing."

I wave to my father to signal that we should perhaps leave now, and he comes toward me, the Fonteneaus trailing slowly behind him.

With each step he rubs the scars on the side of his face.

Perhaps the last person my father harmed had dreamed this moment into my father's future—his daughter seeing those marks, like chunks of warm plaster still clinging to a cast, and questioning him about them, giving him a chance to either lie or tell the truth. After all, we have the proverb, as my father would say: "Those who give the blows may try to forget, but those who carry the scars must remember." ◆



"This is gonna hurt like hell."

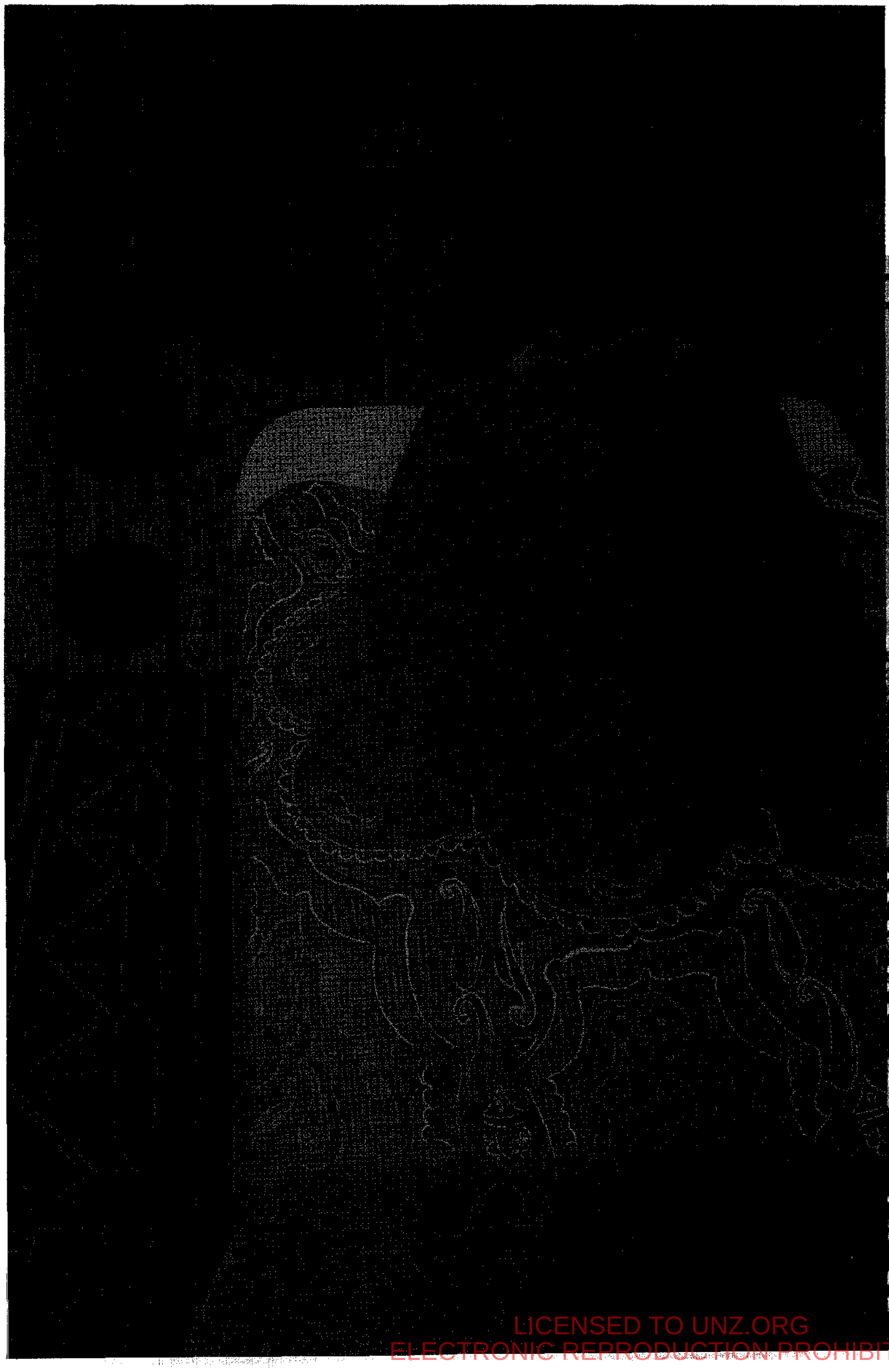
THE THIRD AND FINAL CONTINENT

JHUMPA LAHIRI

I left India in 1964 with a certificate in commerce and the equivalent, in those days, of ten dollars to my name. For three weeks I sailed on the S.S. Roma, an Italian cargo vessel, in a cabin next to the ship's engine, across the Arabian Sea, the Red Sea, the Mediterranean, and finally to England. I lived in London, in Finsbury Park, in a house occupied entirely by penniless Bengali bachelors like myself, at least a dozen and sometimes more, all struggling to educate and establish ourselves abroad.

I attended lectures at L.S.E. and worked at the university library to get by. We lived three or four to a room, shared a single, icy toilet, and took turns cooking pots of egg curry, which we ate with our hands on a table covered with newspapers. Apart from our jobs we had few responsibilities. On weekends we lounged barefoot in drawstring pajamas, drinking tea and smoking Rothmans, or set out to watch cricket at Lord's. Some weekends the house was crammed with still more Bengalis, to whom we had introduced ourselves at the greengrocer, or on the Tube, and we made yet more egg curry, and played Mukesh on a Grundig reel-to-reel, and soaked our dirty dishes in the bathtub. Every now and then someone in the house moved out, to live with a woman whom his family back in Calcutta had determined he was to wed. In 1969, when I was thirty-six years old, my own marriage was arranged. Around the same time, I was offered a full-time job in America, in the processing department of a library at M.I.T. The salary was generous enough to support a wife, and I was honored to be hired by a world-famous university, and so I obtained a green card,

LEFT: DETAIL FROM MARGO HOFF, "MURDER MYSTERY" (1945)/© ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO



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Crackers

and prepared to travel farther still.

By then I had enough money to go by plane. I flew first to Calcutta, to attend my wedding, and a week later to Boston, to begin my new job. During the flight I read "The Student Guide to North America," for although I was no longer a student, I was on a budget all the same. I learned that Americans drove on the right side of the road, not the left, and that they called a lift an elevator and an engaged phone busy. "The pace of life in North America is different from Britain, as you will soon discover," the guidebook informed me. "Everybody feels he must get to the top. Don't expect an English cup of tea." As the plane began its descent over Boston Harbor, the pilot announced the weather and the time, and that President Nixon had declared a national holiday: two American men had landed on the moon. Several passengers cheered. "God bless America!" one of them hollered. Across the aisle, I saw a woman praying.

I spent my first night at the Y.M.C.A. in Central Square, Cambridge, an inexpensive accommodation recommended by my guidebook which was within walking distance of M.I.T. The room contained a cot, a desk, and a small wooden cross on one wall. A sign on the door said that cooking was strictly forbidden. A bare window overlooked Massachusetts Avenue. Car horns, shrill and prolonged, blared one after another. Sirens and flashing lights heralded endless emergencies, and a succession of buses rumbled past, their doors opening and closing with a powerful hiss, throughout the night. The noise was constantly distracting, at times suffocating. I felt it deep in my ribs, just as I had felt the furious drone of the engine on the S.S. Roma. But there was no ship's deck to escape to, no glittering ocean to thrill my soul, no breeze to cool my face, no one to talk to. I was too tired to pace the gloomy corridors of the Y.M.C.A. in my pajamas. Instead I sat at the desk and stared out the window. In the morning I reported to my job at the Dewey Library, a beige fortlike building by Memorial Drive. I also opened a bank account, rented a post-office box, and bought a plastic bowl and a spoon. I went to a supermarket called Purity Supreme, wandering up and down the aisles, comparing prices with those in England. In the end I bought a carton of milk and a box of cornflakes. This was my first meal in America. Even the simple chore of buying milk was new to me; in London we'd had bottles delivered each morning to our door.

IN a week I had adjusted, more or less. I ate cornflakes and milk morning and night, and bought some bananas for variety, slicing them into the bowl with the edge of my spoon. I left my carton of milk on the shaded part of the windowsill, as I had seen other residents at the Y.M.C.A. do. To pass the time in the evenings I read the Boston *Globe* downstairs, in a spacious room with stained-glass windows. I read every article and advertisement, so that I would grow familiar with things, and when my eyes grew tired I slept. Only I did not sleep well. Each night I had to keep the window wide open; it was the only source of air in the stifling room, and the noise was intolerable. I would lie on the cot with my fingers pressed into my ears, but when I drifted off to sleep my hands fell away, and the noise of the traffic would wake me up again. Pigeon feathers drifted onto the windowsill, and one evening, when I poured milk over my cornflakes, I saw that it had soured. Nevertheless I resolved to stay at the Y.M.C.A. for six weeks, until my wife's passport and green card were ready. Once she arrived I would have to rent a proper apartment, and from time to time I studied the classified section of the newspaper, or stopped in at the housing office at M.I.T. during my lunch break to see what was available. It was in this manner that I discovered a room for immediate occupancy, in a house on a quiet street, the listing said, for eight dollars per week. I dialled the number from a pay telephone, sorting through the coins, with which I was still unfamiliar, smaller and lighter than shillings, heavier and brighter than paisas.

"Who is speaking?" a woman demanded. Her voice was bold and clamorous.

"Yes, good afternoon, Madam. I am calling about the room for rent."

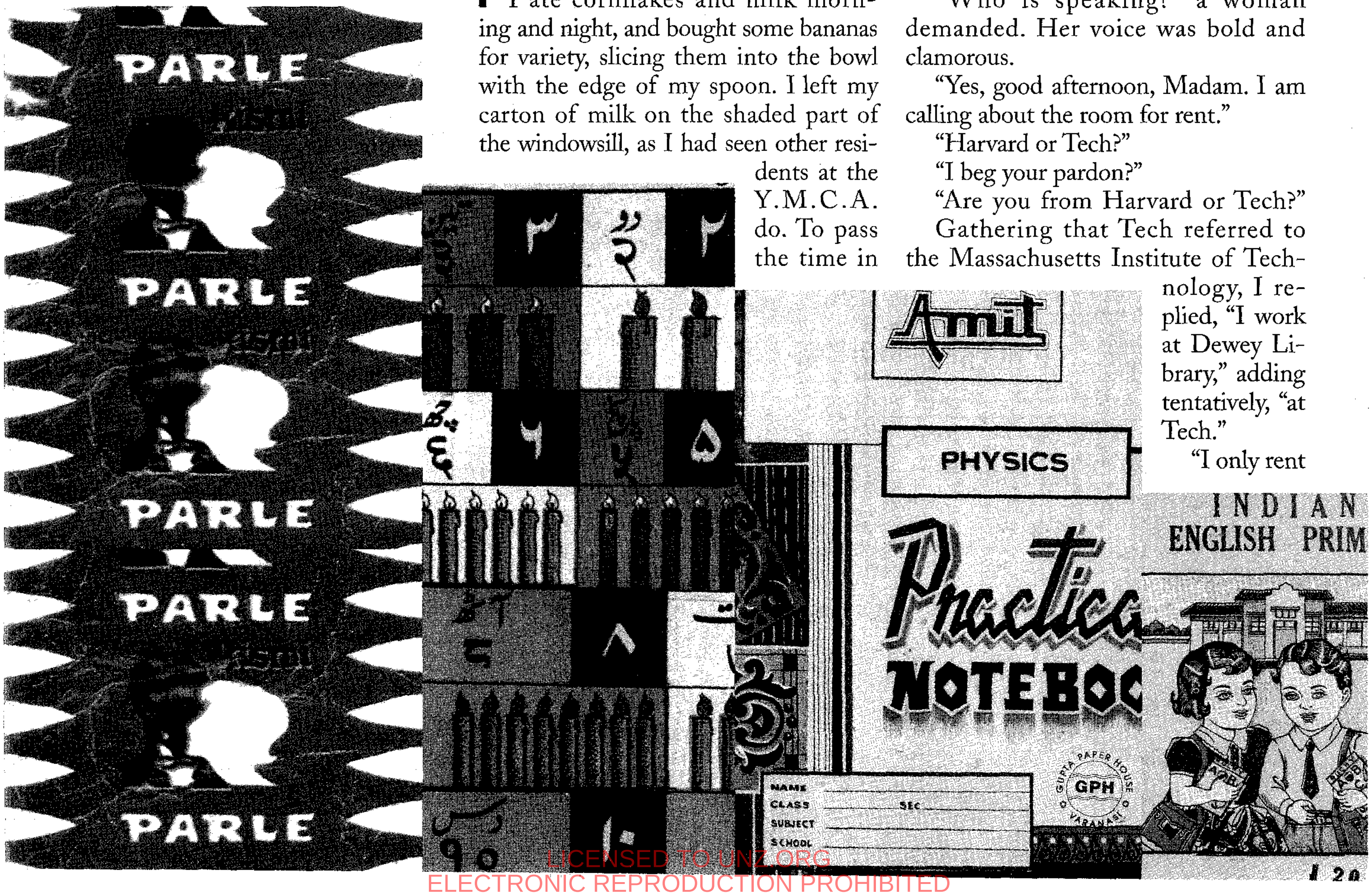
"Harvard or Tech?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"Are you from Harvard or Tech?"

Gathering that Tech referred to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, I replied, "I work at Dewey Library," adding tentatively, "at Tech."

"I only rent



rooms to boys from Harvard or Tech!"

"Yes, Madam."

I was given an address and an appointment for seven o'clock that evening. Thirty minutes before the hour I set out, my guidebook in my pocket, my breath fresh with Listerine. I turned down a street shaded with trees, perpendicular to Massachusetts Avenue. In spite of the heat I wore a coat and tie, regarding the event as I would any other interview; I had never lived in the home of a person who was not Indian. The house, surrounded by a chain-link fence, was off-white with dark-brown trim, with a tangle of forsythia bushes plastered against its front and sides. When I pressed the bell, the woman with whom I had spoken on the phone hollered from what seemed to be just the other side of the door, "One minute, please!"

Several minutes later the door was opened by a tiny, extremely old woman. A mass of snowy hair was arranged like a small sack on top of her head. As I stepped into the house she sat down on a wooden bench positioned at the bottom of a narrow carpeted staircase. Once she was settled on the bench, in a small pool of light, she peered up at me, giving me her undivided attention. She wore a long black skirt that spread like a stiff tent to the floor, and a starched white shirt edged with ruffles at the throat and cuffs. Her hands, folded together in her lap, had long pallid fingers, with swollen knuckles and tough yellow nails. Age had battered her features so that she almost resembled a man, with sharp, shrunken eyes and prominent creases on either side of her nose. Her lips, chapped and faded, had nearly disappeared, and her eyebrows were missing altogether. Nevertheless she looked fierce.

"Lock up!" she commanded. She shouted even though I stood only a few feet away. "Fasten the chain and firmly press that button on the knob! This is the first thing you shall do when you enter, is that clear?"

I locked the door as directed and examined the house. Next to the bench was a small round table, its legs fully concealed, much like the woman's, by a skirt of lace. The table held a lamp, a transistor radio, a leather change purse with a silver clasp, and a telephone. A thick wooden cane was propped against one side. There was a parlor to my right, lined with bookcases and filled with shabby claw-footed furniture. In the corner of the parlor I saw a grand piano with its top down, piled with papers. The piano's bench was missing; it seemed to be the one on which the woman was sitting. Somewhere in the house a clock chimed seven times.

"You're punctual!" the woman proclaimed. "I expect you shall be so with the rent!"

"I have a letter, Madam." In my jacket pocket was a letter from M.I.T. confirming my employment, which I had brought along to prove that I was indeed from Tech.

She stared at the letter, then handed it back to me carefully, gripping it with her fingers as if it were a plate heaped with food. She did not wear glasses, and I wondered if she'd read a word of it. "The last boy was always late! Still owes me eight dollars! Harvard boys aren't what they used to be! Only Harvard and Tech in this house! How's Tech, boy?"

"It is very well."

"You checked the lock?"

"Yes, Madam."

She unclasped her fingers, slapped the space beside her on the bench with one hand, and told me to sit down. For a moment she was silent. Then she intoned, as if she alone possessed this knowledge:

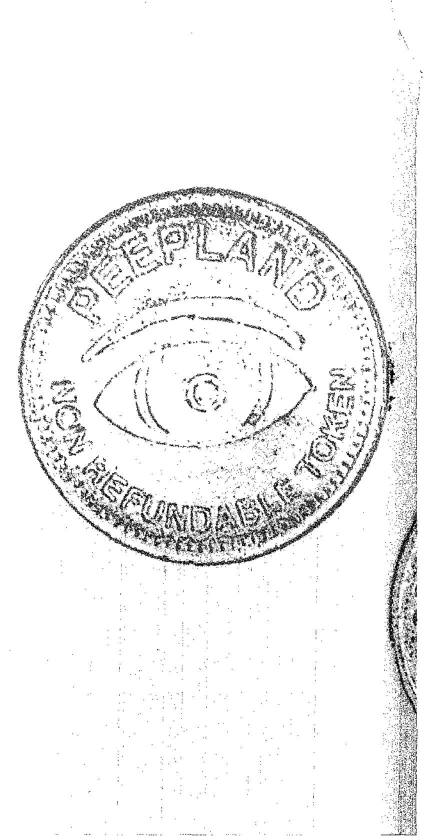
"There is an American flag on the moon!"

"Yes, Madam." Until then I had not thought very much about the moon shot. It was in the newspaper, of course, article upon article. The astronauts had landed on the shores of the Sea of Tranquillity, I had read, travelling farther than anyone in the history of civilization. For a few hours they explored the moon's surface. They gathered rocks in their pockets, described their surroundings (a magnificent desolation, according to one astronaut), spoke by phone to the President, and planted a flag in lunar soil. The voyage was hailed as man's most awesome achievement.

The woman bellowed, "A flag on the moon, boy! I heard it on the radio! Isn't that splendid?"

"Yes, Madam."

But she was not satisfied with my reply. Instead she commanded, "Say 'Splendid!' "



O. KARPINSKY

PEEP

NATHAN

ALLEN FEIN is on his way to Port Authority when he stubs his toe and scuffs his shoe—puts a nick in a five-hundred-dollar investment. He pulls out a handkerchief and spit-shines his toe cap, cursing with every pass of the cloth.

The scuffing, the nick, has bumped Allen from the flow to which he is accustomed. And he looks around Forty-second Street at the gentrified theatres and the wholesome shops, the kind a family can enter in the bright light of day. Where are all the hucksters who used to stand outside promising Nirvana and shaken booty, forbidden acts and creamy thighs? So busy has Allen been with his own transformation that he's missed the one going on around him.

He blushes at the thought, wondering how little Ari Feinberg had ever become Allen Fein, Esq., in fancy oxblood wing tips. When had he become a grown man, on his way home to a loving wife, a pregnant wife, a beautiful blond Gentile wife, who laughed when he didn't know how to work the Christmas lights,

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who bought a candle with a picture of Jesus on it when it came time for the memorial for his father? ("They were out of the little white ones," Claire had said. "Can't you just turn Jesus toward the wall?")

Allen straightens his tie and picks up his briefcase. He takes another look around and asks himself: As polished, as straight, as on the up-and-up as Forty-second Street now appears, is it still the same inside?

And then the man says it.

"Buddy," he says. "Mac," he says. "Upstairs. Girls. Live girls inside."

"What?" Allen says, catching the sign in the window: a giant neon token with "25¢" flashing in its center.

"That's right, buddy," the man says. "Twenty-five cents for a spherical miracle. New York's only three-hundred-and-sixty-degree all-around stage. Just follow the stairs, you can't get lost—all the arrows lead to one place." ♦

The five excerpted stories in this issue, including "Peep Show," will appear in their entirety in the next five issues.

I was both baffled and somewhat insulted by the request. It reminded me of the way I was taught multiplication tables as a child, repeating after the master, sitting cross-legged on the floor of my one-room Tollygunge school. It also reminded me of my wedding, when I had repeated endless Sanskrit verses after the priest, verses I barely understood, which joined me to my wife. I said nothing.

"Say 'Splendid!'" the woman bellowed once again.

"Splendid," I murmured. I had to repeat the word a second time at the top of my lungs, so she could hear. I was reluctant to raise my voice to an elderly woman, but she did not appear to be offended. If anything the reply pleased her, because her next command was:

"Go see the room!"

I rose from the bench and mounted the narrow staircase. There were five doors, two on either side of an equally narrow hallway, and one at the opposite end. Only one door was open. The room contained a twin bed under a sloping ceiling, a brown oval rug, a basin with an exposed pipe, and a chest of drawers. One door led to a closet, another to a toilet and a tub. The window was open; net curtains stirred in the breeze. I lifted them away and inspected the view: a small back yard, with a few fruit trees and an empty clothesline. I was satisfied.

When I returned to the foyer the woman picked up the leather change purse on the table, opened the clasp, fished about with her fingers, and produced a key on a thin wire hoop. She informed me that there was a kitchen at the back of the house, accessible through the parlor. I was welcome to use the stove as long as I left it as I found it. Sheets and towels were provided, but keeping them clean was my own responsibility. The rent was due Friday mornings on the ledge above the piano keys. "And no lady visitors!"

"I am a married man, Madam." It was the first time I had announced this fact to anyone.

But she had not heard. "No lady visitors!" she insisted. She introduced herself as Mrs. Croft.

MY wife's name was Mala. The marriage had been arranged by my older brother and his wife. I regarded the proposition with neither objection nor enthusiasm. It was a duty expected of me, as it was expected of every man. She was the daughter of a schoolteacher in Beleghata. I was told that she could cook, knit, embroider, sketch landscapes, and recite poems by Tagore, but these talents could not make up for the fact that she did not possess a fair complexion, and so a string of men had rejected her to her face. She was twenty-seven, an age when her parents had begun to fear that she would never marry, and so they were willing to ship their only child halfway across the world in order to save her from spinsterhood.

For five nights we shared a bed. Each of those nights, after applying cold cream and braiding her hair, she turned from me and wept; she missed her parents. Although I would be leaving the country in a few days, custom dictated that she was now a part of my household, and for the next six weeks she was to live with my brother and his wife, cooking, cleaning, serving tea and sweets to guests. I did nothing to console her. I lay on my own side of the bed, reading my guidebook by flashlight. At times I thought of the tiny room on the other side of the wall which had belonged to my mother. Now the room was practically empty; the wooden pallet on which she'd once slept was piled with trunks and old bedding. Nearly six years ago, before leaving for London, I had watched her die on that bed, had found her playing with her excrement in her final days. Before we cremated her I had cleaned each of her fingernails with a hairpin, and then, because my brother could not bear it, I had assumed the role of eldest son, and had touched the flame to her temple, to release her tormented soul to heaven.

THE next morning I moved into Mrs. Croft's house. When I unlocked the door I saw that she was sitting on the piano bench, on the same side as the previous evening. She wore the same black skirt, the same starched white blouse, and had her hands folded together the same way in her lap. She looked so much the same that I wondered if she'd spent the whole night on the bench. I put my suitcase upstairs and then headed off to work. That evening when I came home from the university, she was still there.

"Sit down, boy!" She slapped the space beside her.

I perched on the bench. I had a bag

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of groceries with me—more milk, more cornflakes, and more bananas, for my inspection of the kitchen earlier in the day had revealed no spare pots or pans. There were only two saucepans in the refrigerator, both containing some orange broth, and a copper kettle on the stove.

"Good evening, Madam."

She asked me if I had checked the lock. I told her I had.

For a moment she was silent. Then suddenly she declared, with the equal measures of disbelief and delight as the night before, "There's an American flag on the moon, boy!"

"Yes, Madam."

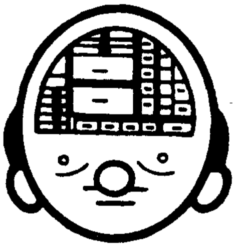
"A flag on the moon! Isn't that splendid?"

I nodded, dreading what I knew was coming. "Yes, Madam."

"Say 'Splendid!' "

This time I paused, looking to either side in case anyone was there to overhear me, though I knew perfectly well that the house was empty. I felt like an idiot. But it was a small enough thing to ask. "Splendid!" I cried out.

Within days it became our routine. In the mornings when I left for the library Mrs. Croft was either hidden away in her bedroom, on the other side of the staircase, or sitting on the bench, oblivious of my presence, listening to the news or classical music on the radio. But each evening when I returned the same thing happened: she slapped the bench, ordered me to sit down, declared that there was a flag on the moon, and declared that it was splendid. I said it was splendid, too, and then we sat in silence. As awkward as it was, and as endless as it felt to me then, the nightly encounter lasted only about ten minutes; inevitably she would drift off to sleep, her head falling abruptly toward her chest, leaving me free to retire to my room. By then, of course, there was no flag standing on the moon. The astronauts, I read in the paper, had seen it fall before they flew back to Earth. But I did not have the heart to tell her.



Friday morning, when my first week's rent was due, I went to the piano in the parlor to place my money on the ledge. The piano keys were dull and discolored. When I pressed one, it made no sound at all. I had put eight dollar bills in an envelope and written Mrs. Croft's name on the front of it. I was not in the habit of leaving money unmarked and unattended. From where I stood I could see the profile of her tent-shaped skirt in the hall. It seemed unnecessary to make her get up and walk all the way to the piano. I never saw her walking about, and assumed, from the cane propped against the round table, that she did so with difficulty. When I approached the bench she peered up at me and demanded:

"What is your business?"

"The rent, Madam."

"On the ledge above the piano keys!"

"I have it here." I extended the envelope toward her, but her fingers, folded together in her lap, did not budge. I bowed slightly and lowered the envelope, so that it hovered just above her hands. After a moment she accepted it, and nodded her head.

That night when I came home, she did not slap the bench, but out of habit I sat beside her as usual. She asked me if I had checked the lock, but she mentioned nothing about the flag on the moon. Instead she said:

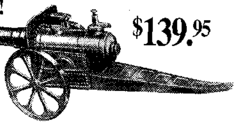
"It was very kind of you!"

"I beg your pardon, Madam?"

"Very kind of you!"

She was still holding the envelope in her hands.

On Sunday there was a knock on my door. An elderly woman introduced herself: she was Mrs. Croft's daughter, Helen. She walked into the room and looked at each of the walls as if for signs of change, glancing at the shirts that hung in the closet, the neckties draped over the doorknob, the box of cornflakes on the chest of drawers, the dirty bowl and spoon in the basin. She was short and thick-waisted, with cropped silver hair and bright pink lipstick. She wore a sleeveless summer dress, a necklace of white plastic beads, and spectacles on a chain that hung like a swing against her chest. The backs of her legs were mapped with dark-blue veins, and her upper arms sagged like the flesh of a roasted eggplant. She told me she lived in Arlington, a town farther up Massachusetts Avenue. "I come once a week to bring Mother groceries. Has she sent you packing yet?"



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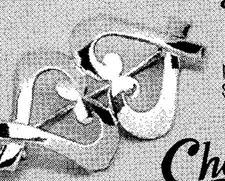

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"It is very well, Madam."

"Some of the boys run screaming. But I think she likes you. You're the first boarder she's ever referred to as a gentleman."

She looked at me, noticing my bare feet. (I still felt strange wearing shoes indoors, and always removed them before entering my room.) "Are you new to Boston?"

"New to America, Madam."

"From?" She raised her eyebrows.

"I am from Calcutta, India."

"Is that right? We had a Brazilian fellow, about a year ago. You'll find Cambridge a very international city."

I nodded, and began to wonder how long our conversation would last. But at that moment we heard Mrs. Croft's electrifying voice rising up the stairs.

"You are to come downstairs immediately!"

"What is it?" Helen cried back.

"Immediately!"

I put on my shoes. Helen sighed.

I followed Helen down the staircase. She seemed to be in no hurry, and complained at one point that she had a bad knee. "Have you been walking without your cane?" Helen called out. "You know you're not supposed to walk without that cane." She paused, resting her hand on the bannister, and looked back at me. "She slips sometimes."

For the first time Mrs. Croft seemed vulnerable. I pictured her on the floor in front of the bench, flat on her back, staring at the ceiling, her feet pointing in opposite directions. But when we reached the bottom of the staircase she was sitting there as usual, her hands folded together in her lap. Two grocery bags were at her feet. She did not slap the bench, or ask us to sit down. She glared.

"What is it, Mother?"

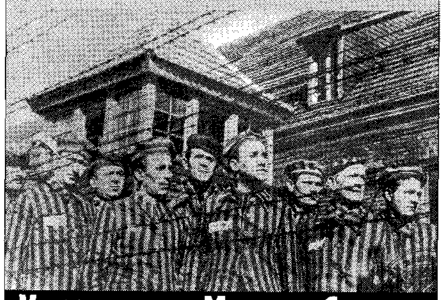
"It's improper!"

"What's improper?"

"It is improper for a lady and gentleman who are not married to one another to hold a private conversation without a chaperone!"

Helen said she was sixty-eight years old, old enough to be my mother, but Mrs. Croft insisted that Helen and I speak to each other downstairs, in the parlor. She added that it was also improper for a lady of Helen's station to reveal her age, and to wear a dress so high above the ankle.

"For your information, Mother, it's



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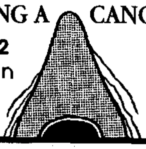

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tide pools shine in the crisp tracks of the deer
where I saw an island, thin as a tongue, its cargo
of bare saplings, mud-bound, paraded like captives,
moored in the shallows, standing room only, with barely
space for two women to walk. See the moon's thumb
whorled on the noon sky? Now the tide's turning
the Hudson out of its bed. Can you see the road?
Then you haven't walked far enough. If you come at dusk
you'll find the deer leaving their ample rooms,
their ears twitching, legs cocked to explode.

—NANCY WILLARD

1969. What would you do if you actually left the house one day and saw a girl in a miniskirt?"

Mrs. Croft sniffed. "I'd have her arrested."

Helen shook her head and picked up one of the grocery bags. I picked up the other one, and followed her through the parlor and into the kitchen. The bags were filled with cans of soup, which Helen opened up one by one with a few cranks of a can opener. She tossed the old soup into the sink, rinsed the saucepans under the tap, filled them with soup from the newly opened cans, and put them back in the refrigerator. "A few years ago she could still open the cans herself," Helen said. "She hates that I do it for her now. But the piano killed her hands." She put on her spectacles, glanced at the cupboards, and spotted my tea bags. "Shall we have a cup?"

I filled the kettle on the stove. "I beg your pardon, Madam. The piano?"

"She used to give lessons. For forty years. It was how she raised us after my father died." Helen put her hands on her hips, staring at the open refrigerator. She reached into the back, pulled out a wrapped stick of butter, frowned, and tossed it into the garbage. "That ought to do it," she said, and put the unopened cans of soup in the cupboard. I sat at the table and watched as Helen washed the dirty dishes, tied up the garbage bag, and poured boiling water into two cups. She handed one to me without milk, and sat down at the table.

"Excuse me, Madam, but is it enough?"

Helen took a sip of her tea. Her lipstick left a smiling pink stain on the rim of the cup. "Is what enough?"

"The soup in the pans. Is it enough food for Mrs. Croft?"

"She won't eat anything else. She stopped eating solids after she turned one hundred. That was, let's see, three years ago."

I was mortified. I had assumed Mrs. Croft was in her eighties, perhaps as old as ninety. I had never known a person who had lived for over a century. That this person was a widow who lived alone mortified me further still. Widowhood had driven my own mother insane. My father, who worked as a clerk at the General Post Office of Calcutta, died of encephalitis when I was sixteen. My mother refused to adjust to life without him; instead she sank deeper into a world of darkness from which neither I, nor my brother, nor concerned relatives, nor psychiatric clinics on Rash Behari Avenue could save her. What pained me most was to see her so unguarded, to hear her burp after meals or expel gas in front of company without the slightest embarrassment. After my father's death my brother abandoned his schooling and began to work in the jute mill he would eventually manage, in order to keep the household running. And so it was my job to sit by my mother's feet and study for my exams as she counted and recounted the bracelets on her arm as if they were the beads of an abacus. We tried to keep an eye on her. Once she had wandered half naked to the tram depot before we were able to bring her inside again.

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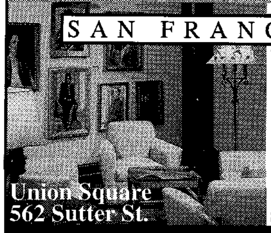

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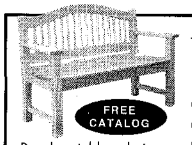

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“I am happy to warm Mrs. Croft’s soup in the evenings,” I suggested. “It is no trouble.”

Helen looked at her watch, stood up, and poured the rest of her tea into the sink. “I wouldn’t if I were you. That’s the sort of thing that would kill her altogether.”

THAT evening, when Helen had gone and Mrs. Croft and I were alone again, I began to worry. Now that I knew how very old she was, I worried that something would happen to her in the middle of the night, or when I was out during the day. As vigorous as her voice was, and imperious as she seemed, I knew that even a scratch or a cough could kill a person that old; each day she lived, I knew, was something of a miracle. Helen didn’t seem concerned. She came and went, bringing soup for Mrs. Croft, one Sunday after the next.

In this manner the six weeks of that summer passed. I came home each evening, after my hours at the library, and spent a few minutes on the piano bench with Mrs. Croft. Some evenings I sat beside her long after she had drifted off to sleep, still in awe of how many years she had spent on this earth. At times I tried to picture the world she had been born into, in 1866—a world, I imagined, filled with women in long black skirts, and chaste conversations in the parlor. Now, when I looked at her hands with their swollen knuckles folded together in her lap, I imagined them smooth and slim, striking the piano keys. At times I came downstairs before going to sleep, to make sure she was sitting upright on the bench, or was safe in her bedroom. On Fridays I put the rent in her hands. There was nothing I could do for her beyond these simple gestures. I was not her son, and, apart from those eight dollars, I owed her nothing.

AT the end of August, Mala’s passport and green card were ready. I received a telegram with her flight information; my brother’s house in Calcutta had no telephone. Around that time I also received a letter from her, written only a few days after we had parted. There was no salutation; addressing me by name would have assumed an intimacy we had not yet discovered. It contained only a few lines. “I

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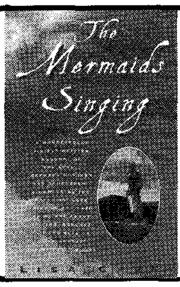

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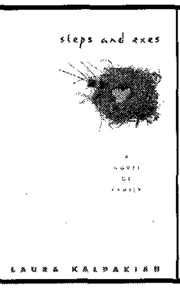

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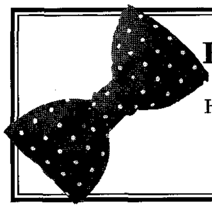

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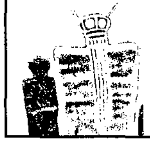

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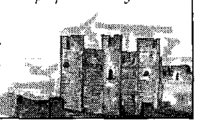

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write in English in preparation for the journey. Here I am very much lonely. Is it very cold there. Is there snow. Yours, Mala."

I was not touched by her words. We had spent only a handful of days in each other's company. And yet we were bound together; for six weeks she had worn an iron bangle on her wrist, and applied vermillion powder to the part in her hair, to signify to the world that she was a bride. In those six weeks I regarded her arrival as I would the arrival of a coming month, or season—something inevitable, but meaningless at the time. So little did I know her that, while details of her face sometimes rose to my memory, I could not conjure up the whole of it.

A few days after receiving the letter, as I was walking to work in the morning, I saw an Indian woman on Massachusetts Avenue, wearing a sari with its free end nearly dragging on the footpath, and pushing a child in a stroller. An American woman with a small black dog on a leash was walking to one side of her. Suddenly the dog began barking. I watched as the Indian woman, startled, stopped in her path, at which point the dog leaped up and seized the end of the sari between its teeth. The American woman scolded the dog, appeared to apologize, and walked quickly away, leaving the Indian woman to fix her sari, and quiet her crying child. She did not see me standing there, and eventually she continued on her way. Such a mishap, I realized that morning, would soon be my concern. It was my duty to take care of Mala, to welcome her and protect her. I would have to buy her her first pair of snow boots, her first winter coat. I would have to tell her which streets to avoid, which way the traffic came, tell her to wear her sari so that the free end did not drag on the footpath. A five-mile separation from her parents, I recalled with some irritation, had caused her to weep.

Unlike Mala, I was used to it all by then: used to cornflakes and milk, used to Helen's visits, used to sitting on the bench with Mrs. Croft. The only thing I was not used to was Mala. Nevertheless I did what I had to do. I went to the housing office at M.I.T. and found a furnished apartment a few blocks away, with a double bed and a private kitchen and bath, for forty dollars a week. One last Friday I handed Mrs. Croft eight dollar bills in an envelope, brought my suitcase downstairs, and informed her that I was moving. She put my key into her change purse. The last thing she asked me to do was hand her the cane propped against the table, so that she could walk to the door and lock it behind me. "Goodbye, then," she said, and retreated back into the house. I did not expect any display of emotion, but I was disappointed all the same. I was only a boarder, a man who paid her a bit of money and passed in and out of her home for six weeks. Compared with a century, it was no time at all.

AT the airport I recognized Mala immediately. The free end of her sari did not drag on the floor, but was draped in a sign of bridal modesty over her head, just as it had draped my mother until the day my father died. Her thin brown arms were stacked with gold bracelets, a small red circle was painted on her forehead, and the edges of her feet were tinted with a decorative red dye. I did not embrace her, or kiss her, or take her hand. Instead I asked her, speaking Bengali for the first time in America, if she was hungry.

She hesitated, then nodded yes.

I told her I had prepared some egg curry at home. "What did they give you to eat on the plane?"

"I didn't eat."

"All the way from Calcutta?"

"The menu said oxtail soup."

"But surely there were other items."

"The thought of eating an ox's tail made me lose my appetite."

When we arrived home, Mala opened up one of her suitcases, and presented me with two pullover sweaters, both made with bright-blue wool, which she had knitted in the course of our separation, one with a V neck, the other covered with cables. I tried them on; both were tight under the arms. She had also brought me two new pairs of drawstring pajamas, a letter from my brother, and a packet of loose Darjeeling tea. I had no present for her apart from the egg curry. We sat at a bare table, staring at our plates. We ate with our hands, another thing I had not yet done in America.

"The house is nice," she said. "Also the egg curry." With her left hand she held the end of her sari to her chest, so it would not slip off her head.

"I don't know many recipes."

She nodded, peeling the skin off each of her potatoes before eating them. At one point the sari slipped to her shoulders. She readjusted it at once.

"There is no need to cover your head," I said. "I don't mind. It doesn't matter here."

She kept it covered anyway.

I waited to get used to her, to her presence at my side, at my table and in my bed, but a week later we were still strangers. I still was not used to coming home to an apartment that smelled of steamed rice, and finding that the basin in the bathroom was always wiped clean, our two toothbrushes lying side by side, a cake of Pears soap residing in the soap dish. I was not used to the fragrance of the coconut oil she rubbed every other night into her scalp, or the delicate sound her bracelets made as she moved about the apartment. In the mornings she was always awake before I was. The first morning when I came into the kitchen she had heated up the leftovers and set a plate with a spoonful of salt on its edge, assuming I would eat rice for breakfast, as most Bengali husbands did. I told her cereal would do, and the next morning when I came into the kitchen she had already poured the cornflakes into my bowl. One morning she walked with me to M.I.T., where I gave her a short tour of the campus. The next morning before I left for work she asked me for a few dollars. I parted with them reluctantly, but I knew that this, too, was now normal. When I came home from work there was a potato peeler in the kitchen drawer, and a tablecloth on the table, and chicken curry made with fresh garlic and ginger on the stove. After dinner I read the newspaper, while Mala sat at the kitchen table, working on a cardigan for herself with more of the blue wool, or writing letters home.

On Friday, I suggested going out. Mala set down her knitting and disappeared into the bathroom. When she emerged I regretted the suggestion; she had put on a silk sari and extra bracelets, and coiled her hair with a flattering side part on top of her head. She was prepared as if for a party, or at the very least for the cinema, but I had no such destination in mind. The evening was balmy. We walked several blocks down Massachusetts Avenue, looking into the windows of restaurants and shops. Then,

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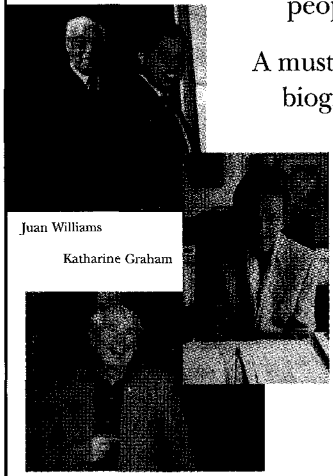

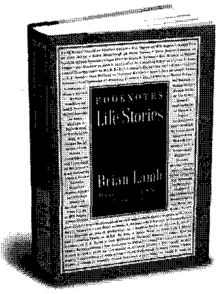

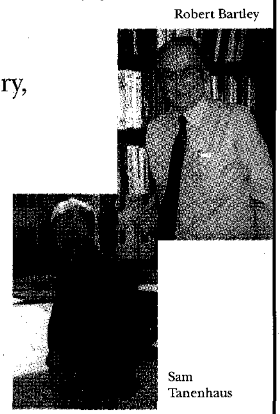

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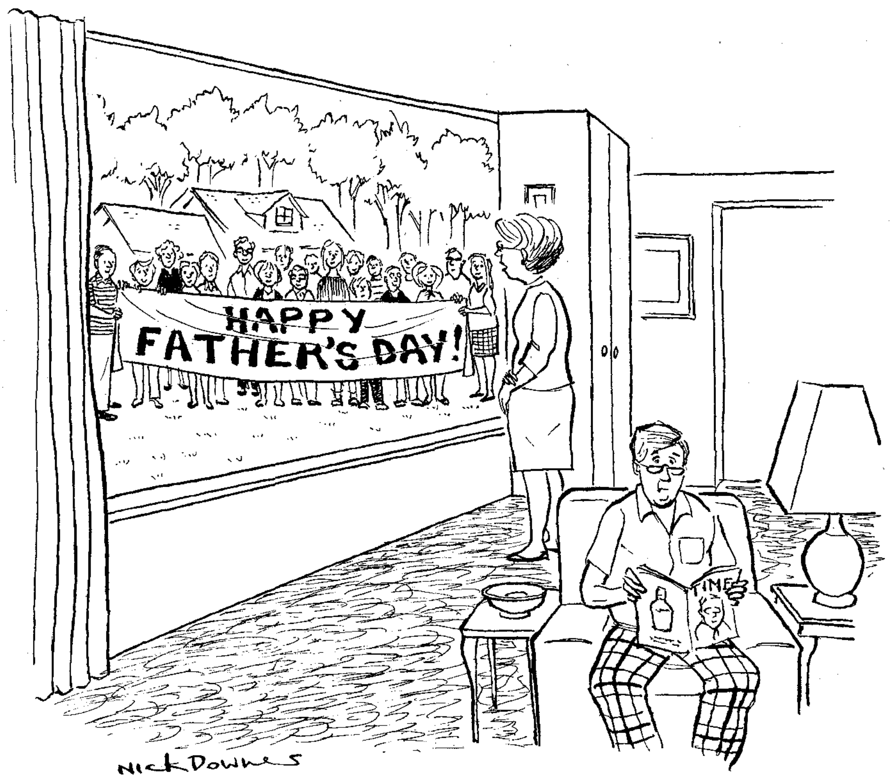


"I thought that sperm-bank donors remained anonymous."

• •

without thinking, I led her down the quiet street where for so many nights I had walked alone.

"This is where I lived before you came," I said, stopping at Mrs. Croft's chain-link fence.

"In such a big house?"

"I had a small room upstairs. At the back."

"Who else lives there?"

"A very old woman."

"With her family?"

"Alone."

"But who takes care of her?"

I opened the gate. "For the most part she takes care of herself."

I wondered if Mrs. Croft would remember me; I wondered if she had a new boarder to sit with her each evening. When I pressed the bell I expected the same long wait as that day of our first meeting, when I did not have a key. But this time the door was opened almost immediately, by Helen. Mrs. Croft was not sitting on the bench. The bench was gone.

"Hello there," Helen said, smiling with her bright pink lips at Mala. "Mother's in the parlor. Will you be visiting awhile?"

"As you wish, Madam."

"Then I think I'll run to the store, if you don't mind. She had a little accident. We can't leave her alone these days, not even for a minute."

I locked the door after Helen and walked into the parlor. Mrs. Croft was lying flat on her back, her head on a peach-colored cushion, a thin white quilt spread over her body. Her hands were folded together on her chest. When she saw me she pointed at the sofa, and told me to sit down. I took my place as directed, but Mala wandered over to the piano and sat on the bench, which was now positioned where it belonged.

"I broke my hip!" Mrs. Croft announced, as if no time had passed.

"Oh dear, Madam."

"I fell off the bench!"

"I am so sorry, Madam."

"It was the middle of the night! Do you know what I did, boy?"

I shook my head.

"I called the police!"

She stared up at the ceiling and grinned sedately, exposing a crowded row of long gray teeth. "What do you say to that, boy?"

As stunned as I was, I knew what I had to say. With no hesitation at all, I cried out, "Splendid!"

Mala laughed then. Her voice was full of kindness, her eyes bright with amusement. I had never heard her laugh before, and it was loud enough so that Mrs. Croft heard, too. She turned to Mala and glared.

"Who is she, boy?"

"She is my wife, Madam."

Mrs. Croft pressed her head at an angle against the cushion to get a better look. "Can you play the piano?"

"No, Madam," Mala replied.

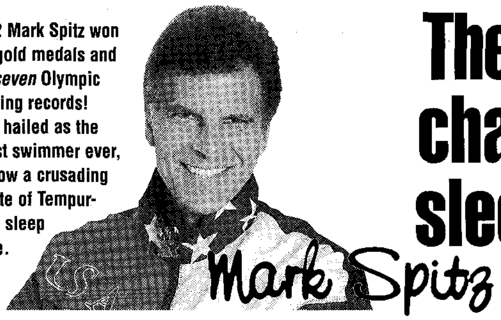
"Then stand up!"

Mala rose to her feet, adjusting the end of her sari over her head and holding it to her chest, and, for the first time since her arrival, I felt sympathy. I remembered my first days in London, learning how to take the Tube to Russell Square, riding an escalator for the first time, unable to understand that when the man cried "piper" it meant "paper," unable to decipher, for a whole year, that the conductor said "Mind the gap" as the train pulled away from each station. Like me, Mala had travelled far from home, not knowing where she was going, or what she would find, for no reason other than to be my wife. As strange as it seemed, I knew in my heart that one day her death would affect me, and stranger still, that mine would affect her. I wanted somehow to explain this to Mrs. Croft, who was still scrutinizing Mala from top to toe with what seemed to be placid disdain. I wondered if Mrs. Croft had ever seen a woman in a sari, with a dot painted on her forehead and bracelets stacked on her wrists. I wondered what she would object to. I wondered if she could see the red dye still vivid on Mala's feet, all but obscured by the bottom edge of her sari. At last Mrs. Croft declared, with the equal measures of disbelief and delight I knew well:

"She is a perfect lady!"

Now it was I who laughed. I did so quietly, and Mrs. Croft did not hear me. But Mala had heard, and, for the first time, we looked at each other and smiled.

I LIKE to think of that moment in Mrs. Croft's parlor as the moment when the distance between Mala and me began to lessen. Although we were not yet fully in love, I like to think of the months that followed as a honeymoon of sorts. Together we explored the city and met other Bengalis, some of whom are still friends today. We discovered that a man named Bill sold fresh fish on Prospect Street, and that a shop in Harvard Square called Cardullo's sold bay leaves and cloves. In the evenings we walked to the Charles River to watch sailboats drift across the water, or had ice-cream cones in Harvard Yard. We bought a camera with which to document our life together, and I took pictures of her posing in front of the Prudential Building, so that she could send them to her parents. At night we kissed, shy at first but quickly bold, and discovered pleasure and solace in each other's arms. I told her about my voyage on the S.S. Roma, and about Finsbury Park and the Y.M.C.A., and my evenings on the bench with Mrs. Croft. When I told her stories about my mother, she wept. It was Mala who consoled me when, reading the *Globe* one evening, I came across Mrs. Croft's obituary. I had not



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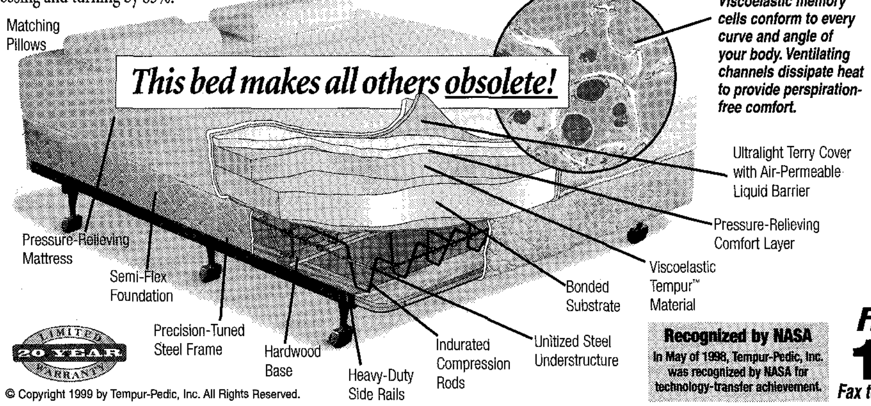

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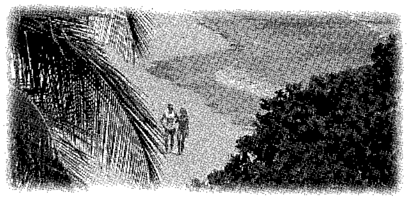

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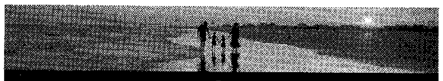

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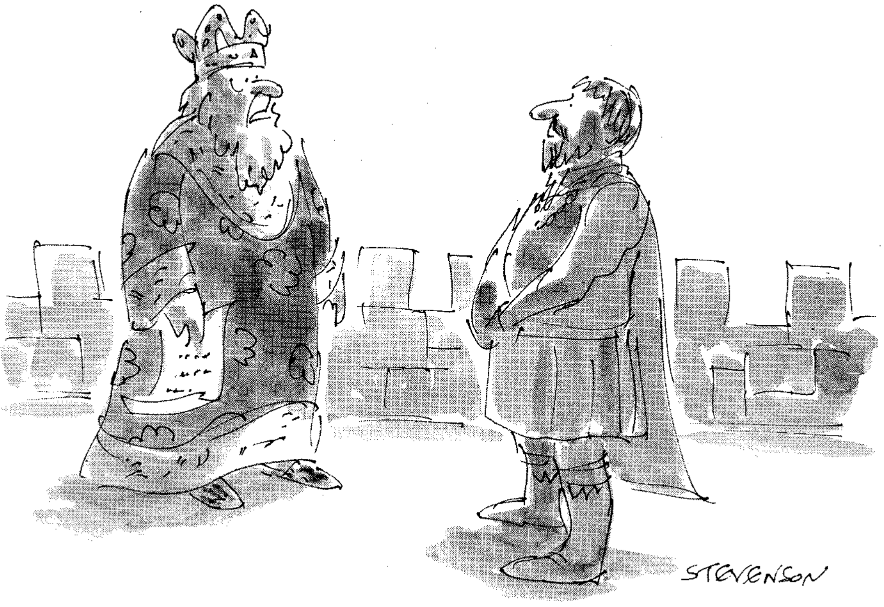
thought of her in several months—by then those six weeks of the summer were already a remote interlude in my past—but when I learned of her death I was stricken, so much so that when Mala looked up from her knitting she found me staring at the wall, unable to speak. Mrs. Croft's was the first death I mourned in America, for hers was the first life I had admired; she had left this world at last, ancient and alone, never to return.

As for me, I have not strayed much farther. Mala and I live in a town about twenty miles from Boston, on a tree-lined street much like Mrs. Croft's, in a house we own, with room for guests, and a garden that saves us from buying tomatoes in summer. We are American citizens now, so that we can collect Social Security when it is time. Though we visit Calcutta every few years, we have decided to grow old here. I work in a small college library. We have a son who attends Harvard University. Mala no longer drapes the end of her sari over her head, or weeps at night for her parents, but occasionally she weeps for our son. So we drive to Cambridge to visit him, or bring him home for a weekend, so that he can eat rice with us with his hands, and speak in Bengali, things we sometimes worry he will no longer do after we die.

Whenever we make that drive, I always take Massachusetts Avenue, in spite of the traffic. I barely recognize the buildings now, but each time I am there I return instantly to those six weeks as if they were only the other day, and I slow down and point to Mrs. Croft's street, saying to my son, Here was my first home in America, where I lived with a woman who was a hundred and three. "Remember?" Mala says, and smiles, amazed, as I am, that there was ever a time that we were strangers. My son always expresses his astonishment, not at Mrs. Croft's age but at how little I paid in rent, a fact nearly as inconceivable to him as a flag on the moon was to a woman born in 1866. In my son's eyes I see the ambition that had first hurled me across the world. In a few years he will graduate and pave his own way, alone and unprotected. But I remind myself that he has a father who is still living, a mother who is happy and strong. Whenever he is discouraged, I tell him that if I can survive on three continents, then there is no obstacle he cannot conquer. While the astronauts, heroes forever, spent mere hours on the moon, I have remained in this new world for nearly thirty years. I know that my achievement is quite ordinary. I am not the only man to seek his fortune far from home, and certainly I am not the first. Still, there are times I am bewildered by each mile I have travelled, each meal I have eaten, each person I have known, each room in which I have slept. As ordinary as it all appears, there are times when it is beyond my imagination. ♦



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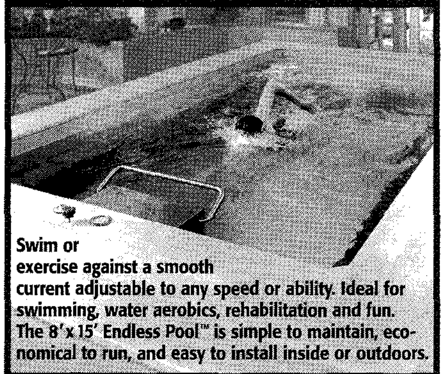

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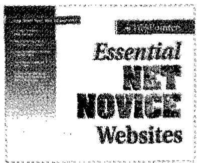

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FIRST NOVELS

LAST THINGS, by Jenny Offill (Farrar, Straus & Giroux; $23). To eight-year-old Grace Davitt, an only child raised on hard science and hallucinatory folktales, the world is a wondrous and terrifying place: a monster lives in the nearby lake, her babysitter warns her about black holes, and the extinction of the species is a regular topic of conversation in her household. Grace's father is a rationalist, but the bright and dangerous center of her universe is her beautiful mother, Anna, who is also her teacher and co-conspirator. Anna speaks to her daughter in a secret language, takes her skinny-dipping in the lake at night, and makes a birthday cake for the Earth, which is 4.6 billion years old. When Anna starts to lose her mind, the axis of Grace's world slips, and the results are devastating for child and reader alike.

SINATRALAND, by Sam Kashner (Overlook; $22.95). Throughout his adult life, Finkie Finkelstein has written letters to Frank Sinatra, who has never written back. In this often hilarious epistolary novel, Finkie is also rewriting his own story, so that his many failures as a husband, father, lover, and salesman seem almost redeemable when measured against the larger-than-life shenanigans of his hero. A Borscht Belt Willy Loman, Finkie increasingly resembles a by-product of Sinatraland himself. But, like his daughter, Nancy Ava, he finally learns to live "in two homes . . . with one heart."

THE COLDEST WINTER EVER, by Sister Souljah (Pocket; $23). Seventeen-year-old Winter, the daughter of a drug lord, is contemptuous of the desperation around her: "Brooklyn-born I don't have no sob stories for you about rats and roaches and pissy-pew hallways." But when her father is busted she finds herself destitute and friendless. She wanders through the lives of various men, gets remanded to a halfway house, and—in the novel's most surreal segment—crashes with a do-gooder called Sister Souljah, who proves incapable of helping her. Winter is nasty, spoiled, and almost unbelievably libidinous, and it's ample evidence of the author's talent that she is also deeply sympathetic.

BATTLE CREEK, by Scott Lasser (Morrow; $24). Gil Davison coaches an amateur baseball team sponsored by a funeral company, and though his wife has left him, his father is dying, and his grown son has drifted away from him, he thinks he's got a good shot at the championship this year. Lasser's prose is spare and precise ("the dance of infield practice and the pop of the ball in the catcher's mitt"), but the characters he writes about—greenhorns and aging athletes, fathers and sons—are most eloquent in their silence.

LORD OF THE BARNYARD, by Tristan Egolf (Grove; $24). This exuberant bildungsroman tracks the rise and fall of John Kaltenbrunner, an outcast Corn Belt boy who begins his life a prodigy of animal husbandry and ends it, a decade later, a garbageman, dying under a bridge on one of the few patches of unsullied ground in a town he has single-handedly converted to an offal pit: "maggots breeding in cooking grease, gulls ripping at paper plates, woodchucks running by with used sanitary pads in their jaws." The source of this havoc—the hero's great deed—is a garbage strike, and it elicits the novel's most outrageous moments. But, high-flown as Kaltenbrunner's story becomes, it is always grounded in the pain of being an outsider.

THE METAPHYSICAL TOUCH, by Sylvia Brownrigg (Farrar, Straus & Giroux; $24). When Emily Piper—Pi—a philosophy graduate student, loses her dissertation and her home in an Oakland fire, she finds herself futureless and existentially disconnected. She retreats in shock to a Northern California town and begins exploring the Internet, where she encounters the diary postings of JD, a bright, neurotic man with an "ambition to go. Permanently." Soon the two are involved in a consuming correspondence. The characters in this playful, intelligent novel are never quite distinct, yet Brownrigg explores our ideas about knowledge and certainty with a light and rewarding touch.

THE BASIC EIGHT, by Daniel Handler (St. Martin's; $23.95). This shrewdly funny novel is the diary of Flannery Culp, the alleged ringleader of eight high-school seniors who are accused of ritualistic Satanic murder, and instantly become the patients of countless armchair therapists and favorites with the What's Wrong with Our Youth crowd. Handler is a charming writer with a lovely mastery of voice, but the book is weakened by his attempt to turn a clever idea into social satire.

MIRACLE MAN, by Ben Schrank (Quill; $13). Kelly, a college dropout living in Spanish Harlem, is falling in love—with Luz, a Puerto Rican girl in his building, and with the act of stealing from the swank apartment buildings a few blocks south, where every street "would most definitely be private if it didn't have to be public." The stealing, initially of the Robin Hood variety, escalates until Kelly is forced to question why, exactly, he's breaking the law; as the ethical lines blur, Schrank makes New York seem sharp and new.

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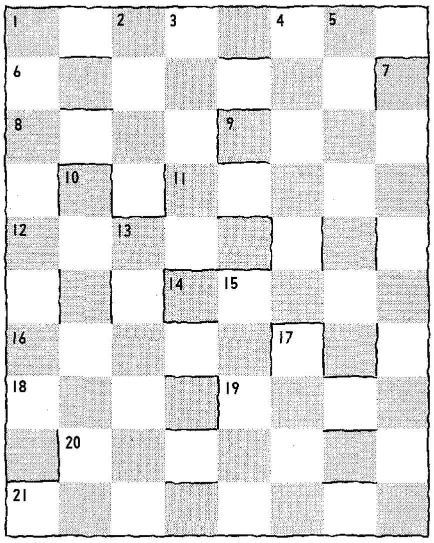

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The solution to puzzle No. 92 appears on page 144. For a free copy of "The New Yorker's Guide to Solving Cryptic Crosswords," please send your fax number or a stamped, self-addressed envelope to "Solvers' Guide," The New Yorker, 20 West 43rd Street, New York, N.Y. 10036. For an electronic version, send an E-mail to puzzleguide@newyorker.com.

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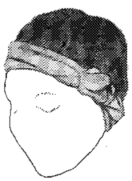

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ISSUES I DEALT WITH IN THERAPY

MATTHEW KLAM

We were on a preppy East Coast resort island in the middle of summer, we just flew in for the wedding of my incredible friend Bob. We were here on vacation, away from the hot city; I was so glad to be out of that fucking house. The simple fact that it's a plane trip away and you're staying in a hotel on this fake, preppy island, and because you're not married, yet you and your girlfriend are at a wedding together, because you're too cheap to go on decent vacations, because your own day-to-day life could use some tuning up and like any sane person you've already effortlessly erected an invisible barrier between yourself and that life back there and you're now pretending that it isn't real, and because Bob had become this big deal, my most skyrocketing friend, and Bob's wedding weekend finally arrived—well, it was a new beginning and I was feeling the excitement.

We got to the hotel and parked the rental car and walked down to the water in our street clothes. People passed by with beach umbrellas and L. L. Bean canvas tote bags, floating in the heat, and kids ran happily in the wet patch left by the outgoing tide, and seagulls hovered rigidly in the air above us, screaming into the wind. We walked back up through the mushy sand to the steps of the parking lot of the hotel, Phylida's long white translucent sundress blowing in front of me. We passed the advance team for Gore, fifteen blond-haired women in their early twenties, wearing hairbands, talking on cell phones on the little patch of grass bordering some brown, split-wood railings in front of the hotel.

I was looking at everything: the people getting out of the rental cars, the bracelets on the women, whether they actually seemed glad to be here; the sunshine brightly beaming. It was Bob's sunshine, you were on his island now. I looked at Phylida; she smiled. The wind lifted her dress all the way up in the front, before she could catch it. A guy struggled to pull out his golf clubs from the trunk and a valet half his age whisked the bag away like a feather. The wife laughed. Who were they? I think all the rooms in the hotel were rented to the four hundred people invited to the wedding.

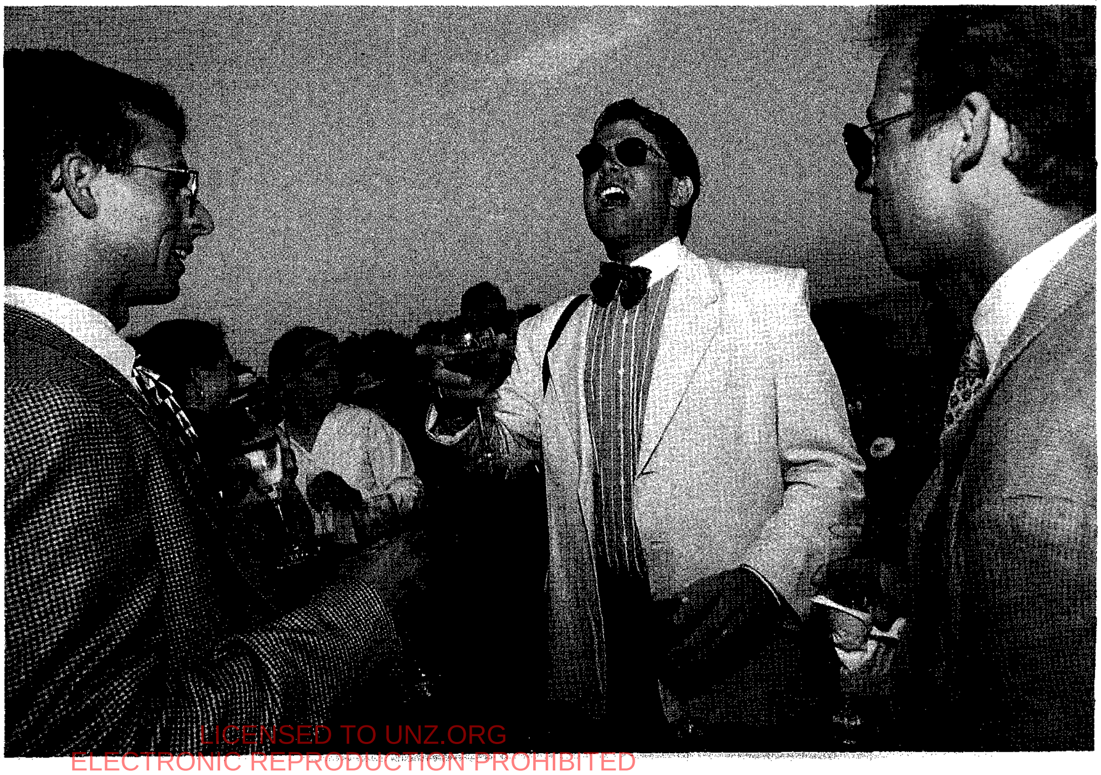
It was an old wooden hotel, the charming kind, creaking stairway, crooked floors. Our room was small, antique crap in it, a jingling glass lampshade on a side table, a queen-size bed raised to an enormous height, a frilly cover, a cheap, modern glass door on sliders leading out to a wooden balcony that gave you splinters and, as promised, looked out on a downwind stretch of the same beach where Bob and Niloo would be getting married, a mile away.

They'd been hyping us with stuff in the mail for six months: the "Set this date aside" card; the letter that began, "Tell us exactly what you eat," with rows of boxes to check off ("Are you dairy tolerant?" "Do you like sushi or do you eat it to be polite?" "Our chef will not cook with peanuts"); the six-piece engraved invitation. Lists of the island's golf courses, a note about where they were registered ("Sheetmaker to the Earl of Windsor"), a special mailing to the lady guests—"We hope you'll start shopping for that perfect full-length formal summer gown to wear to our summer wedding on the shore." Another list for me, because I was an usher—what kind of tux shirt collar they (Bob) wanted us to get, suggested books for preparing your toast. A sheet with the history of the island, how it played a part in the Revolutionary War, how the something of democracy was born here, with a letter Bob typed up—"to help free our nation of tyranny evermore and make America the most wonderful country in the world"—and how great Americans retired here.

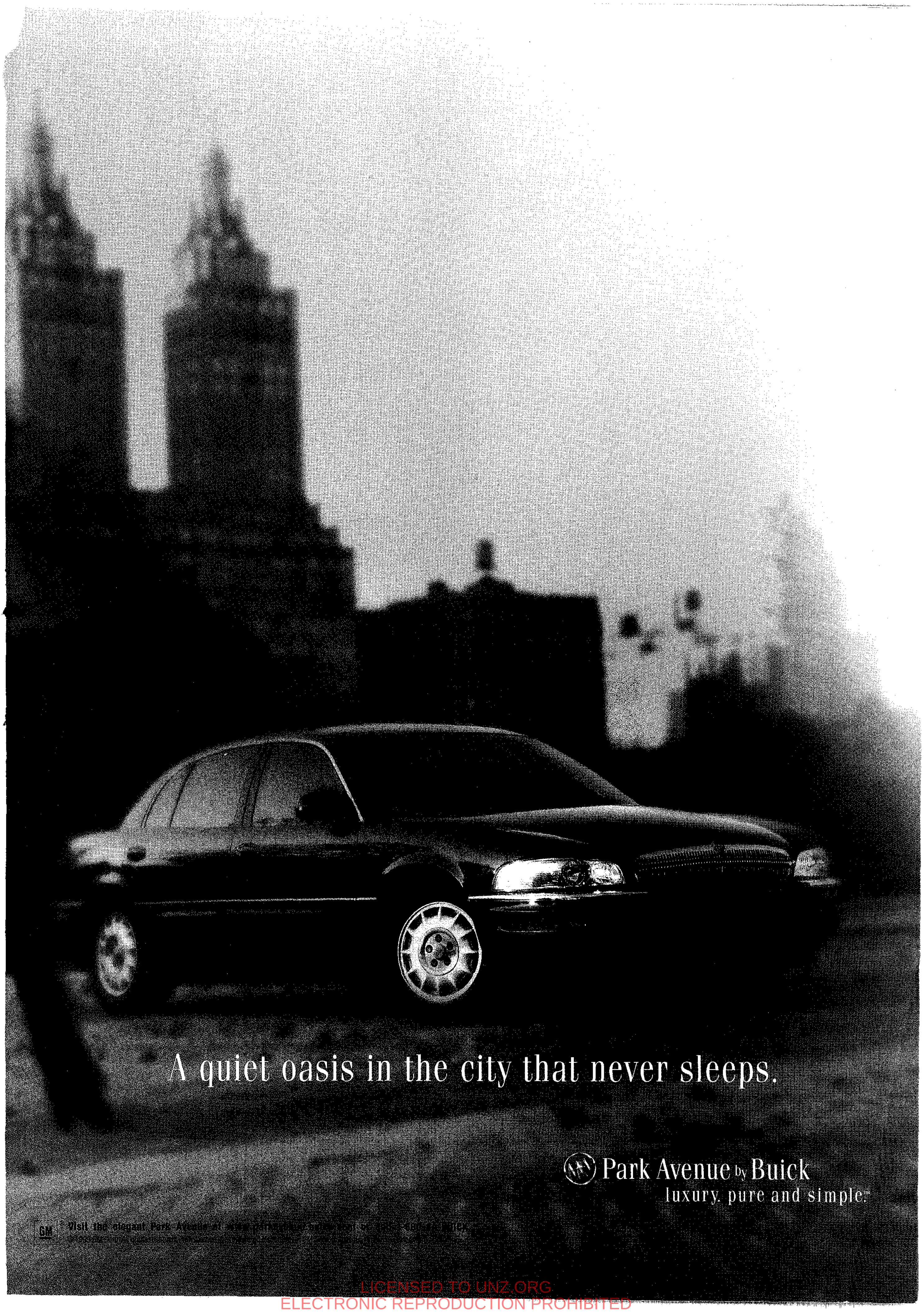
The freak show of the wedding was like a side thing: Madeleine Albright would be here tomorrow; Ruth Bader Ginsburg insisted on performing the ceremony; that advance team for Gore was trying to figure out whether the rain would hold off so Al could helicopter in for an appearance.

What was I doing here? ♦

The five excerpted stories in this issue, including "Issues I Dealt with in Therapy," will appear in their entirety in the next five issues.



LAUREN GREENFIELD, "BETH AND P.K.'S WEDDING, GOSNOLD" / JULIE SAUL GALLERY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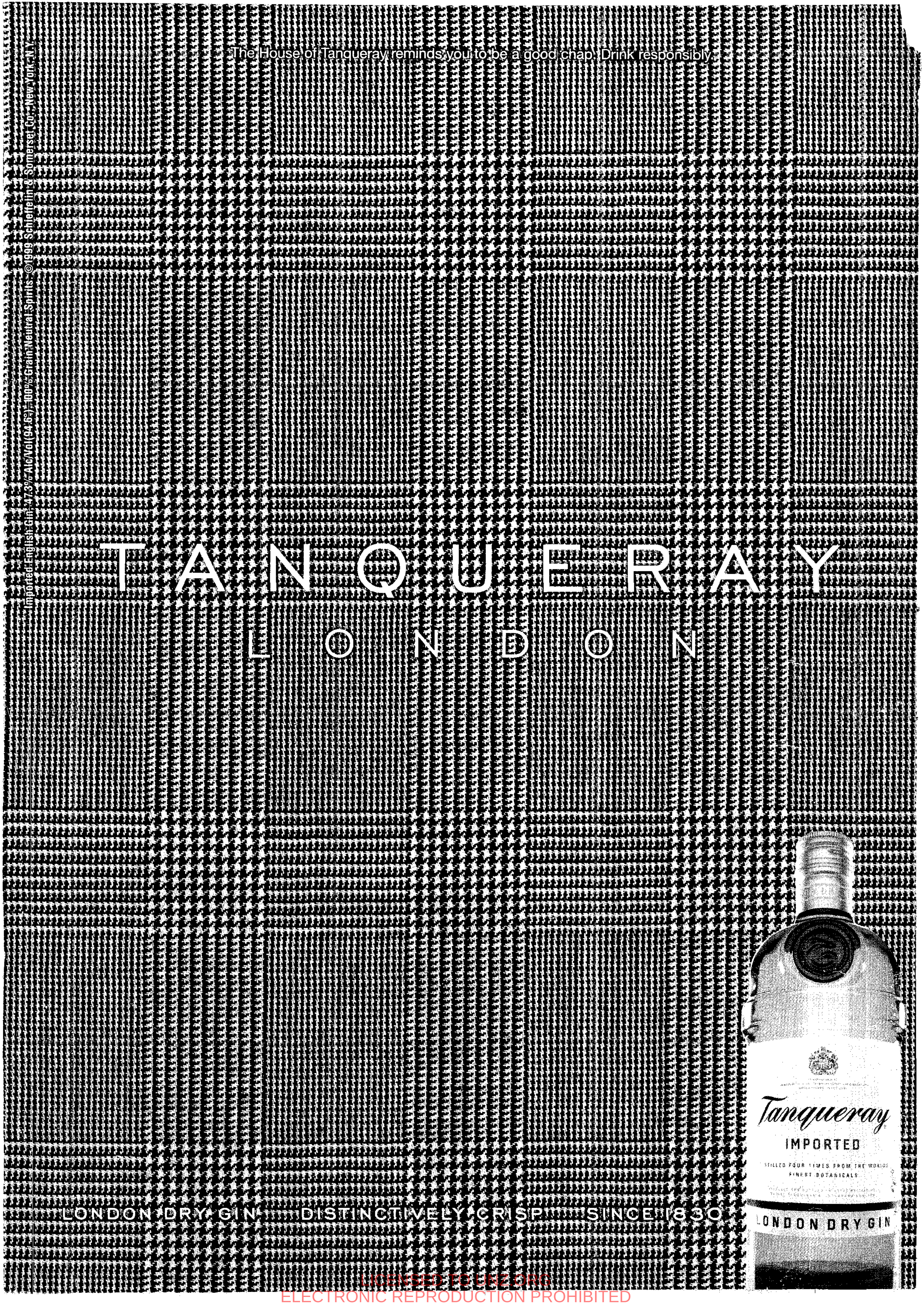
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